

Higher education and the media: a meeting of minds?

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Introduction

The interface between universities and the media has become one of the most important, but least understood aspects of higher education's generally more open relationship with the outside world. Both are in the communications business, albeit operating on dramatically different timescales and often with contrasting objectives, news being an instant business that deals, whenever possible, in exclusivity, whereas academic inquiry is not time-limited and is rooted in traditions of open publication.

Nevertheless, academia and journalism have moved closer to one another than any observer would have predicted even 30 years ago. A symbiotic relationship has developed between the two and alliances have been forged that can spill over into competition between media organizations and universities.

This chapter examines the pressures that have brought about such convergence of roles and considers where they may lead in future. Will the global expansion of higher education and simultaneous contraction of print-based news organizations encourage further patterns of common ownership? And will such arrangements be mutually beneficial, or might they compromise the independence of each partner, to the particular detriment of universities?

The changing relationship between the universities and the media

Of course, many would question whether it is meaningful to talk at all about trust between institutions that are as massive and wide-ranging as the academy and the media. Real trust is normally established between individuals. I know that there are some Vice-Chancellors I can ring for guidance on a sensitive issue who have known me long enough to be confident that I will not betray their trust, but that does not mean that if the call was from another journalist, even from my own paper, they would be as forthcoming.

So it is dangerous to generalize. Some universities have perfectly harmonious relationships with their news media; others quite the reverse. Both the media and Higher Education Institutions have distinct characteristics in different countries. I can only judge from my own experience, mainly in the U.K., but also with a

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growing number of international universities and news organizations. I have advised and written about universities in Asia, as well as in Europe, and I have generally found a slightly uneasy, but increasingly professional, relationship with the media.

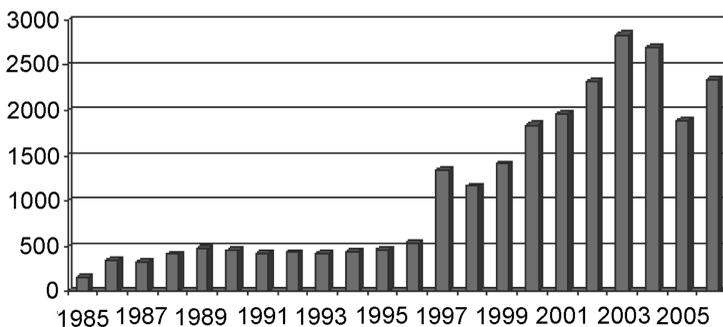
When I started to write about higher education, alarmingly, more than 30 years ago, it was all quite different. Universities (by which I mean, in this context, Vice-Chancellors, Presidents and their senior administrators), and, even more so, individual academics, did not trust newspapers or television stations to understand their world or to report positively on it. The much smaller cadre of university communications officers were employed largely to keep universities out of the press.

Not that the press or broadcast media were particularly interested in universities' affairs in the first place. Apart from the occasional student occupation or the even more occasional research breakthrough, there was little news about universities. Even when I became the education editor of *The Times* in 1991, most of the interest was in schools, not higher education. That changed with the advent of mass higher education. Suddenly, many more readers aspired to a university education for their children, or were students or graduates themselves. In addition, for the same reasons, higher education also moved up the political agenda (certainly in Britain, anyway).

A simple time series of the number of items in U.K. national newspapers containing the words 'higher education' over the period 1985–2005 illustrates the point (Figure 1).²

A search on the same News International database for items about universities would have produced much larger numbers because it would have covered news stories and features about research, as well as everything from sport to obituaries. By focusing on higher education, the chart picks up the growing political interest in universities, as well as the consumer coverage. The first peak, in 1997,

Figure 1



U.K. universities in the press

2 Times database of national newspapers. The author's survey of articles on higher education in *The Times*, *Sunday Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Sunday Telegraph*, *The Independent*, *The Independent on Sunday*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Daily Mirror*.

coincides with the Dearing Report on the future of U.K. higher education and the announcement of the first tuition fees to be paid by students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Interest then builds to the debate in Parliament, in 2003, about trebling those fees. Were the chart to continue to the present day, it would no doubt need a new scale to cope with the interest in the latest trebling of the fees.

The chart perhaps also captures one of the enduring tensions between the academy and the media, which lies in differing perceptions of what is newsworthy. It shows barely a flicker of interest when the U.K. polytechnics became universities in 1992, one of the great reforms in the country's higher education system over the last 50 years. News organizations approach higher education from the consumer's (or the taxpayer's) viewpoint, and in any walk of life this is often different to the view from the inside. Higher education had not arrived on editors' radar sufficiently for the 'promotion' of the polytechnics to be big news, although, ironically, it has since become a seminal moment for the critics of mass higher education in newspapers and elsewhere.

Probably the other driver of greater media interest in universities, again part of the move to a mass higher education system, was the gradual change in journalism towards graduate entry. When I took my first job at the Evening Chronicle, in Newcastle upon Tyne, in the mid-1970s, to be a graduate was to be in a very small minority, regarded with considerable suspicion by most of the hard-bitten reporters and subeditors. Now I would be surprised if there were many on that paper, and certainly on any of the national newspapers, who are not graduates.

That change has produced journalists with better contacts in universities, as well as more understanding of and interest in higher education. It may also have resulted in rather more confidence within universities that this new breed of graduate journalists would get the story right. They don't always, of course, but at least there is basic familiarity with the system and rather more empathy.

Even so, many journalists have an inferiority complex about universities. They think that academics are cleverer than them, may look down on them and will try to pull the wool over their eyes when it suits them. This last trait is a natural state for journalists and not by any means confined to their view of universities, but there is also a tendency to think of academics as divorced from reality, an outmoded view perhaps, but one that is still held.

What certainly has changed is the attitude of universities and academics to the media. Most now feel that they need the media much more than in the past, both at local and national level. Press offices have expanded in virtually all U.K. universities and are no longer primarily defensive, whereas academics who once ran a mile from media coverage in case their research was vulgarized and misinterpreted, are now much more willing to seek a wider audience. There are still those, of course, who regard the media with suspicion, or even contempt, but there is more acceptance of the mutual benefits of a relationship, not necessarily with the media as a whole, but with individual representatives of it.

Lars Engwall [1] identified many of the same characteristics in Sweden in 'Minerva and the media' in 2008: the growth of communications offices, their increasing professionalism and consequent growth in influence over universities. As he rightly said, universities aped large corporations in this respect, beginning

with largely defensive units designed to create a buffer between the university hierarchy and the press, and later becoming more proactive.

My only quibble with this analysis is whether the professionalization of universities' media activities is substantially different to the same process in other services. In U.K. universities, very few senior finance officers have been university administrators for their whole career, and the same could be said of estates officers and the people who run accommodation offices and careers services. The age of the all-rounder, or the person who is more familiar with universities than the service that he or she heads up, is long gone. Perhaps the real difference is that information offices may be more influential on the general direction of universities. The Vice-Chancellor of one of the U.K.'s leading universities told me recently that only his deputy and his personal assistant were in his office more frequently than his head of communications.

That might be something that would worry many academics, but it tends to enhance the level of trust between universities and the media. There is nothing more frustrating for a journalist than wasting time on an inquiry that has to be carried out at second hand because the information officer is not sufficiently close to the seat of power to know what is going on. That was invariably the case 20 years ago in the U.K., but not now.

Public attitudes to universities in the U.K. suggest that this closer relationship has not been to the disadvantage of universities: 80% of people polled in 2010 thought that higher education should have the same or more government funding than it enjoyed at the time [2]. And this despite the fact that 45% of those responding had never had any contact with a university. Although support was strongest in the professional classes, who were most likely to be graduates, it permeated all social classes.

The universities and the media in competition

Universities and the media are more comfortable in each other's company now, but does that amount to trust? Their roles have converged to such an extent that they are even competitors on occasion. Wikipedia, for example, describes *The Washington Post* as an 'education and media company' – note the order – because it owns Kaplan, one of the world's biggest education companies. The day is not far off where it could own a Higher Education Institution in the U.K. while also reporting on its activities, as it already does in some other countries.

On the other side of the fence, Shanghai Jiao Tong University has published rankings that were previously the province of newspapers and magazines. Although media organizations have no monopoly on such activities, that enterprise has attracted a certain amount of disapproval in Asian universities, where some believe it is not the place of one university to judge the performance of others. The university has set up a separate company to produce and publish the rankings, and the commercial nature of the operation has extended to advertising on its website for discount vouchers and places at colleges often far removed from those in the rankings [3].

The U.K.'s OU (Open University) is another example of an academic institution with a foot in the media camp. Its access to BBC (British Broadcasting

Corporation) television channels used to be for late-night lectures for its students, which other interested viewers could join if they wished. Now learning technology has moved online and the OU's expertise is mined to make popular programmes such as *Coast*, which also sell internationally. The process might be seen as an extension of the phenomenon of the 'celebrity don', many of whom have become sought-after media commentators on subjects well beyond the disciplines in which they made their names.

There are more examples practically every month of universities and media organizations straying into each other's territory. In the U.K., for example, Pearson, owner of the *Financial Times* and part-owner of *The Economist*, has applied for degree-awarding powers for the examinations group that it also owns [4], whereas Lancaster University has bought the Work Foundation, not a traditional media organization, but a think tank founded by one journalist and now run by another which specializes in publication and events.

Like *The Washington Post* and Kaplan, Pearson sees media and education as a natural 'fit'. The company started out as a construction business, but moved via merchant banking into provincial and then national newspaper publishing, as well as television production. Pearson Education, which operates separately but under the control of the same main board as the company's media arm, recruited its first degree students in business and management in 2012 after several years of experience in schools and colleges through the Edexcel assessment and testing company.

Lancaster University, by contrast, said it was hoping to increase its influence on research in employment areas, as well as assisting the U.K.'s economic recovery by purchasing the Work Foundation. Sue Cox, Dean of Lancaster University Management School, said there were "obvious synergies" between the university and the foundation [5]. Although the purchase was met with some surprise among commentators owing to its rarity value, there was no suggestion that the link would compromise the university's independence or that higher education and think tanks should not mix.

Yet another model is The Conversation, an Australian initiative that provides universities and academics with their own media outlet to publicize research. Funded initially by four universities and the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, it employs professional editors to work with academics to bring research findings to a wider audience in ways that meet with the approval of those who carried out the work. The well-staffed website has a growing following and now also receives financial support from government and private companies.

Peter Doherty [6], the Australian Nobel laureate, explains the rationale behind the initiative in a testimonial on The Conversation website that pulls no punches about the performance of the commercial media:

"When it comes to complex issues like climate change that have major implications for all of us, there is an enormous difficulty in getting well-resourced and verifiable information across to the general public [...] Newspapers have their own goals and agendas, principally to do with selling their product. The visual media are increasingly going to sound bites."

The Conversation could be dismissed as merely a more ambitious version of the websites run by university organizations all around the world. However,

unlike those operations, it is not concerned primarily with higher education policy. Rather, it reflects a frustration with the way in which research findings are reported, despite the best efforts of university communications offices, and a surprising optimism about the audience for a less sensationalist style. Headed by a former editor of *The Age* in Melbourne and *The Observer* in London, it is more generously staffed than some newspapers and has 1600 academic authors as sources for its material.

The Conversation is not the only example of universities trying to cut out the media middleman. The Futurity website, hosted by the University of Rochester, New York, is also acting as a portal for research findings across a much wider spread of institutions. Futurity now has more than 60 participating universities in the U.S.A., Canada, U.K. and Australia, which fund the website and contribute to a managing board [7]. Similar to The Conversation, both its output and its audience continue to grow.

Flurries of concern

Trust is certainly not something that grows with competition, so it may be that this convergence of roles is less than healthy in this respect. Yet, it is surely inevitable, as media organizations diversify and universities also seek new sources of income. The knowledge economy, after all, is just that. New relationships are forming all the time, and we will have to get used to organizations jumping from one role to another.

There are already commercial relationships between universities and media organizations that cause occasional flurries of concern. In the U.K., for example, the clearing house for undergraduate places, which is owned by the universities collectively, has been criticized in the past for advertising vacancies through a single news organization, once via *The Times* and subsequently *The Independent*. In Canada, the common ownership of Thomson Reuter and *The Globe and Mail* prompted questions about potential conflicts of interest when the *Times Higher Education* rankings (compiled by Thomson Reuter) received front-page treatment in *The Globe and Mail*. Furthermore, to illustrate the implications of competition, the Canadian Journalism Project pointed out that the concerns were being raised by *Maclean's* magazine, which could be seen as a competitor itself, as a longstanding publisher of university rankings [8].

Expect the waters to become murkier as both collaboration and competition between media and academia grow. Also expect universities' confidence in their ability to shape reporting of their activities to ebb with the rise of new media, especially social media. Coverage of events is almost instant, often with no pretence to impartiality, and far more difficult to refute; opinions are frequently more extreme and less likely to be based on fact. Whereas ministers or partner institutions may not believe what they read on Facebook or some previously unknown blog, the same does not go for prospective (or current) students, who could be the main concern of universities having recruitment difficulties. Even those who are not in difficulty do not want a malicious or simply inaccurate item to gain credence if it might put off promising candidates.

Universities are trying much harder to get their own material onto such sites, but they have to be both quick and savvy to counter bad publicity. Some use their own students to put their side of the story; others simply post brief and unequivocal statements. It is not easy to deal with, and universities may actually appreciate the advantages of old-style media, where a retraction can be demanded and an inaccurate item removed from websites and databases.

Whatever the complications, however, media interest in higher education continues to grow, as does mutual dependency. Newspapers and magazines, let alone 24-hour news broadcasting and television, would be lost without the availability of academic expertise. In addition, public interest in access to and the quality of universities has reached new levels all around the world. Universities have grown more adept at making use of their new position in the limelight: in the U.K., for example, the extended debate over new fee levels was carried out largely through the media, with Vice-Chancellors and unions only too happy to lobby for their preferred solution, on or off the record. There was quite a thorough analysis, not just in the specialist press, of the likely impact of different policies on widening participation, as well as international competitiveness.

Rankings

Elsewhere, there has been keen interest in the relative quality of universities, stimulated by national and international league tables, which can be seen as a microcosm of the changing relationship between higher education and the media. Rankings remain the most fraught, although in many ways also the most important, point of contact between the two. They can have consequences beyond the wildest dreams (or wishes) of their compilers, from a Royal Commission on the performance of the leading university in Malaysia to the stimulus for wholesale reforms of the university systems in Germany and France. Rankings have been used as the basis for preferential funding for selected universities in Thailand and as a measure for salary incentives for university presidents in the U.S.A.

Rankings are almost never popular among those who are being ranked. Although their existence has become accepted by universities, controversy remains over what can or should be measured, as well as over weightings and detailed methodology. Yet, they not only influence university behaviour, but also are used as prime marketing material even by their strongest critics. As Professor David Eastwood (now the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Birmingham) said when launching a report on rankings [9] as Chief Executive of the Funding Council for Higher Education in England: "Universities deplore rankings one day and deploy them the next."

It can be argued that universities overreact to rankings. In the U.K., at least, there is little correlation between league table position and the subsequent volume of applications. Manchester, Leeds and Manchester Metropolitan universities consistently attract among the largest number of applications for first-degree places, but none appears in the top 25 in any of the main league tables. Neither has any pattern been established between a drop in position and a slump in applications.

Nevertheless, rankings undoubtedly influence international students' choices of university and are taken particularly seriously in Asia. As a result, they have an impact on decision-making in a growing number of universities and can easily destroy the wider trust established between the publishers and those who feel misrepresented. If universities are to have confidence in the rankings produced by media organizations, the methodology used in any assessments must be transparent, consistent and, where possible, stable. In particular, rankings risk losing credibility if they purport to measure activities, such as teaching, whose quality cannot currently be assessed reliably, especially on an international scale.

The longest-established rankings, which have stuck broadly to that principle, those published domestically by *US News and World Report* and *The Times*, have not avoided boycotts by groups of universities, but they are well understood and grudgingly accepted for what they are. The same may become true of the Shanghai Jiao Tong University and QS (Quacquarelli Symonds) rankings on the international scene, since both have maintained basically the same methodology over several years.³

International rankings present different challenges to domestic ones, which have more comparable data to choose from. The shortage of genuinely comparable international statistics has encouraged QS and *Times Higher Education* to follow *US News and World Report* in the use of reputational surveys, which are themselves the object of mistrust among many academics. Surprisingly large numbers of senior university staff believe that most academics have no idea where the best research is to be found even in their own subject, and many think that such exercises are manipulated by universities. In fact, the number of participants is too large and methodology too tight for that to be a serious risk, but the view cannot be discounted in any discussion of trust.

Trust is built on mutual understanding, which is often absent where rankings are concerned. Universities see them as a verdict on their own performance, which should take their institutional mission into account; the publishers treat them as guides for specific consumers, usually prospective undergraduates, in the case of domestic rankings, which may include relevant factors that are at odds with individual missions. The use of entry grades in many domestic rankings is a prime example: vital information for the candidate and a key determinant of standards, but beyond the control of universities and, as a matter of principle, not a criterion for those whose priority is open access to higher education.

Rankings are only one facet of the interaction between higher education and the media, but one whose importance should not be underestimated. They have the power to sour relationships if they are not handled responsibly. But for as long as governments and universities' own representative groups find judgments on the relative quality of institutions too controversial, or too unsound, to contemplate, key decisions on methodology will be taken mainly by commercial organisations.

There are signs of some international organisations losing patience with this and initiating their own higher education comparisons, but the outcome is

3 The author was the founder and remains the editor of *The Times Good University Guide* and is a member of the Executive Board of the QS World University Rankings.

unlikely to be classic rankings. The European Commission's U-Multirank project is heading towards comparisons of universities by subject, which divide departments into bands, rather than giving a numerical ranking [10]. In addition, the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) is testing students from different universities in a narrow range of subjects for its AHELO (Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes) project, which may produce national averages of the sort it already produces for secondary education [11].

The advisory boards and expert review groups that are now associated with virtually all the main rankings should help bring universities and rankers closer together, as long as their recommendations are taken seriously. Universities are quick to challenge any perceived errors in their own ranking scores, but have not always engaged with the compilers about broader questions of methodology. A sustained dialogue would be to the benefit of both sides.

Future developments

In a more fundamental sense, however, the relationship between higher education and the media is still taking shape. Although universities have become more professional at handling the media and news organisations are more interested in universities' affairs, it may be too soon to describe this as a 'meeting of minds' in the accepted use of the phrase.

With private sector higher education expanding all around the world, it is natural that media companies should be among the new proprietors of universities. Indeed, they may be more acceptable partners to academics than the venture capitalists and others who are likely to dominate the sector. Nevertheless, such enterprises are bound to alter the relationship between universities and those who are or might become competitors. The demands of the knowledge economy and the pressures on the finances of universities in most countries are already throwing traditional universities and media organisations together in ways that may change both in the long term.

Comments by Thorsten Nybom⁴

Introduction

In a handful of essays during at least the last two decades, I have repeatedly argued that today it is not only inaccurate, but even potentially dangerous, to consider the media and science as "soldiers in the same liberal-democratic enlightenment army" [12]. Over the last approximately 30 years, the media has emancipated itself from its traditional allies: science and politics. Thus the media has ceased to be the intermediary between the general public and the two institutionalized forms of collective human action, politics and systematic research that the liberal-democratic society used to regard as its two fundamental pillars, on which

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collective action should be based. Instead, the media has turned into an autonomous, and literally, irresponsible centre of power in western society.

Thus when a lot of people, in a routine fashion, use 'the information society' and 'the knowledge society' as synonymous and interchangeable conceptions, it not only shows a lack of insight, but also constitutes a nearly fatal mistake. The information society is and remains at odds with something that could be labelled 'the knowledge society', and in the very near future the media can develop into perhaps the deadliest enemy of institutionalized science and knowledge production.

However, in my arguments in these brief reflections, I will not go any further down this dangerous pseudo-political and pseudo-philosophical road. Instead, I will primarily try to discuss and comment on the increasing visibility in all types of media that affects the daily lives of universities and particularly that omnipresent phenomenon we commonly call ranking, to which John O'Leary has given us an equally interesting, thought-provoking and eloquent introduction in the present chapter.

Rankings

Over the last decade, different types and variations of rankings, preferably in the form of league tables, have become a more or less regular, although still controversial, element in higher education and research policy [13]. Ever since the rankings were introduced in the early 1980s, the initiators, almost everywhere, have been primarily extra-mural, commercial operators in the newspaper and magazine world [*U.S. News and World Report* and *Newsweek* (USA), *Maclean's* (Canada), *The Times*, *Sunday Times*, *The Guardian*, *Times Higher Education*, *Financial Times* and *The Economist* (U.K.), *Die Zeit* and *Der Spiegel* (Germany) and *Fokus* (Sweden)].

The manifest media interest is hardly surprising, since the commercial and public relations revenues from these fairly costly activities, nevertheless, seem to be considerable. Some detractors would therefore argue that this commercial interest is the prime mover behind the growing rank industry, and hardly the officially repeated altruistic objective to provide prospective students and their ambitious middle-class parents with solid and relevant information concerning the quality of higher education and its utility value, or to satisfy other stakeholders' and funders' legitimate demands of efficiency and cost control.

However, regardless of the actual motives behind this worldwide deluge of rankings, there is hardly any reason for the higher education representatives to moralize over the present state of affairs. Instead, it is high time universities contemplated what deficits and negligence in their own behaviour, and even lack of responsibility, have actually promoted or at least contributed to a situation where externally initiated rankings today appear to be not just news and information commodities, but are also perceived as totally legitimate and relevant evaluations of academic quality to an increasing number of societal actors, who more or less justifiably consider themselves to be legitimate stakeholders when it comes to deciding the higher education system's size, quality, efficiency, resources and missions.

There are, of course, also a number of more or less ‘objective’ structural forces behind the emergence of the ranking industry and growing media attention:

- The higher education systems’ almost random expansion, not least from the early 1990s, making ‘input control’ more or less impossible
- The increasing costs and the subsequent reduction of per capita funding in practically all European national higher education systems
- The growing heterogeneity both among institutions and students: the reduced transparency of the higher education systems
- The rather abrupt and sometimes half-baked transition from highly regulated national systems to NPM (New Public Management) and thus the transition to quasi-autonomy and ‘output control’
- The change in funding from public block grants towards different forms of ‘competitive funding’ from all kinds of sources
- The increasing U.S. dominance in the sector at almost all levels
- The emergence of a more ‘academic’ but at the same time also a more volatile and unpredictable labour market (employability)
- The intensified competition for resources, students and staff (‘branding craze’)
- The emergence of a global higher education market
- The retreat from responsibility for higher education by the state, under the official label of ‘autonomy’
- The introduction of ‘self-financing’ (student fees)
- The transition from ‘higher’ to tertiary education (>40%)
- The gradual shift from education as a ‘public’ to a ‘private’ good

However, as I mentioned earlier, one crucial factor behind the growth of the ranking industry, and not least its public and hence commercial success has certainly been the Higher Education Institutions’ own inability and unwillingness to systematically produce relevant, impartial, transparent and critical information regarding its two, by and large publicly funded, core activities: research and education. And whenever any extramural actor/organization has made any attempts to fill this gap they have been met by fierce criticism and dismissals from the representatives of the higher education community.

The tendency to brush aside almost any kind of external criticism has not only included the well-founded complaints that ranking lists and media coverage often lack sufficient relevance, validity, reliability and significance. The objections have unfortunately often also been directed against more qualified and thoughtful critical attempts. The rebuttals from higher education representatives have usually been characterized by a sort of principle and programmatic dogma that research and advanced academic training are activities of such a delicate and complicated nature that they, regarding almost every conceivable aspect, can only be understood and thus properly evaluated by insiders.

This supercilious attitude could possibly be upheld as long as the higher education system’s scope was limited and more or less homogeneous regarding tasks and students. However, during at least the past three decades, the cost and expansion of higher education and its increasing heterogeneity has meant that this

dismissive attitude towards external scrutiny has become impossible to explain and defend.

The public image and credibility of European Higher Education Institutions was certainly not improved by their initial responses, approximately 15–20 years ago, to the steadily growing national and global competition over resources and students and explicit demands for some kind of transparent accountability, a process that coincided with intensified media interest. When this started to become a grim reality, their first gut reaction was to start distributing glossy folders of the run-of-the-mill travel agency model rather than producing relevant, transparent and evidence-based information about the quality, size, aim and direction of their institutions, which were to an overwhelming extent funded by taxes. With slight exaggeration, one could say that these glossy brochures, starting to emerge in the mid-1990s, at least in Sweden, tried to convey the impression that the Swedish higher education landscape almost without exception consisted of universities and university colleges with material and intellectual resources comparable with those of MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Stanford University and University of California, Berkeley [14].

With these simplistic reactions, the higher education sector in practice paved the way for and invited different external initiatives to improve transparency, accountability, quality control etc., including media attention not least in the form of rapidly expanding ranking initiatives. The producers of rankings could, at least with some justification, assume the role of more or less the only non-partisan observers, whose aim primarily was to provide students and their parents with the best available information before they made one of their most vital joint decisions. In addition, they could also present themselves as an efficient 'ombudsman' for the taxpayers and other substantial funders of higher education by providing at least some indications as to whether, and how, 'their' substantial investments were paying off [15].

This has changed. From recent studies it appears fairly clear that in many cases, the rankings are now both directly and indirectly affecting the institutions' tactical and strategic actions and thinking, and that they have clear, albeit very different consequences for different institutions, and at different institutional levels, and they are also gradually starting to affect considerations and actions on the individual level.

As of today, the most well-informed studies I have seen on the impact of rankings and media presence are primarily concerned with the U.K. [9]. However, since Britain, and especially England, in many ways has been, and continues to be, somewhat of a frontrunner in university/research funding and in higher education policy during the last few decades, there are very good reasons for others to note and discuss the English experience.

According to these studies not one single Higher Education Institution openly acknowledges that the outcomes of the rankings have a direct and decisive impact on their strategic considerations and long-term policy, even if they admit that the results are evaluated and discussed rather thoroughly. Almost all institutions have, nevertheless, also created permanent analysis groups not only to discuss the outcomes of the rankings, but also to monitor and improve the internal production and processing of the data that directly or indirectly

may affect the outcome of the rankings. In addition, as O'Leary indicates in his paper, the number of information officers has probably more than quadrupled, and their standing in the university hierarchy has risen markedly during the last 20 years.

A not unexpected, but nonetheless troubling, finding is that it mainly seems to be university boards that are most likely to ascribe immediate policy relevance to ranking results. To a lay-dominated university board, often recruited from the quarterly-report-obsessed business sector, and with sometimes almost rudimentary knowledge of university life, changes in the ranking can be perceived as almost the only unambiguous and 'objective' evidence of institutional success or decline. League tables then tend to become the bottom line in the 'balance sheet' of the 'company' [16].

Consequently, when the board is worried, an insecure university leadership becomes concerned and feels a more or less immediate pressure to take actions. Eventually then, universities could be tempted to carry out relatively expensive 'quick fixes' primarily in order to affect simple, but in some rankings weighty, indicators. One example is that at least some 'ambitious' English and European universities have invested in smaller 'shares' of some members of the nomadic Nobel laureate tribe. This they have certainly not done with the intention to improve the short- or long-term quality of their education, but primarily to boost their standings in the league tables of, for instance, the Shanghai Jiao Tong type, where living and sometimes dead Nobel laureates are valued unusually high, and to create positive media attention.

Significantly, the most immediate and forceful reaction in the universities to the major changes initiated by the rankings and the ensuing intensified media presence has been in the area of 'institutional promotion and marketing'. At least thus far, however, the impact on such core activities as courses, recruitment of academic staff, teaching methods and research focus has on the whole been minor.

The 'stakeholders' who most uncritically and immediately appear to use the rankings are, unsurprisingly perhaps, big companies' recruitment and employment agencies such as the British AGR (Association of Graduate Recruiters), which themselves both regularly produce and eagerly consult the existing rankings. There should perhaps be good reasons to consider the long-term implications of these perfunctory and rather unsophisticated recruitment procedures regarding big companies' propensity and capacity for critical reflection and innovative thinking. One might perhaps suspect that these recruitment procedures have been frequently used by, e.g. Lehman Brothers, BP (British Petroleum) and RBS (Royal Bank of Scotland).

Regarding the impact of ranking for the individual student's actual institutional and educational choice, i.e. the essential 'public good' that the rankings are producing according to the protagonists, it seems, for very good reasons, to be extremely limited, so far. The only reasonable guess put forward is that the students from more privileged social strata (and their parents) probably have a more pronounced tendency to study the rankings than fellow students who come from deprived socio-academic conditions. The same differences might possibly be observed between those students who have a national or

even international perspective, and those who have a local perspective in their educational choices.

There is also a more well-grounded opinion that rankings play an important and increasing role not only for foreign students' preferences, but also for foreign governments' and international research financiers' decision on cooperation and resources-allocation, both in terms of research spending and recruitment policies. In addition, with the gradual introduction of almost 'American' Ivy League tuition fees in Europe, rankings and media presence might become a very significant dimension and eventually play an increasingly important role in the future.

Concluding remarks

Finally, there are, however, two visible tendencies connected to the ranking business that could eventually have a far-reaching impact on higher education systems in Europe. First, at the level of the individual academic teacher/researcher, one can detect a change in the patterns of institutional mobility, i.e. a reduced propensity to make career moves from a higher- to a lower-ranked academic institution. Secondly, likewise, at the institutional level, rankings obviously play an increasingly important role when it comes to decisions regarding organized, institutional, long-term national and international cooperation. Especially among the more esteemed institutions, it has gradually become a more or less explicit policy to focus their co-operation initiatives and exchange agreements with institutional sisters that are higher up, or at least on the same level, on the international ranking ladders.

As the former President of Stanford University, Donald Kennedy, predicted in a lecture 15 years ago, this tendency towards an intensified form of co-opetition – cooperate in order to become optimally competitive – will certainly lead to a much more stratified and vertically differentiated higher education world system with a diminishing number of haves and a growing number of have-nots. We might seriously ask ourselves if this development is a good thing? And if so, for whom?

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