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Global university ranking and performance improvement

What kind of international academic relations are created by rankings?

Stakeholders inside and outside the higher education sector want comparative data, they enjoy comparative data, and they need to understand the global higher education setting. Ranking provides a clear-cut mapping of ‘who’s who in the zoo’ and at best, an objective guide to the main concentrations of research capacity and reputation, though it does not tell people where they will learn the most or the best. By identifying leading institutions and providing comparative data, ranking facilitate ‘internationalization’ in the simple sense of cross-border relations between nations, and between institutions within nations. For example, ranking informs university partnership strategies, guides student choices and enables investors in research to target funding and capacity building strategies. But internationalization takes many different forms and can express a range of purposes, from learning, swapping knowledge and building the global public good to making money and taking control of the world. The more interesting question is that contained in the title of the conference. What kind of ‘international academic relations’ are created by ranking? The paper will argue that global ranking has been powerful in shaping global higher education as a relational environment, in three ways. In doing so it has seized on certain potentials in the environment, magnifying and institutionalising those potentials, and this has blocked other possibilities. First, competition. Ranking has constituted higher education as a market-like global competition of leading universities and of nations. Second, hierarchy. Ranking is a core element of the system of valuation that has developed in higher education, whereby unequal weights are assigned to knowledge and credentials. Third, performance. Ranking has installed a performance economy that shapes behaviour. Once we recognise that ranking shapes international academic relations in these ways, we can then evaluate ranking schemes in terms of the effects that they have. For example, how accurate is the system of valuation? Is there sufficient scope for innovation, for recognition of new value? Does the performance regime drive improvement, in terms of stakeholder goals and public goods?