

French Presidency of the European Union

Conference of Paris

International comparison of education systems: a European model?

13-14 November 2008

Presidency Conclusions on Typology and Ranking of the Higher Education Institutions: the European Approach

The need for stakeholder-oriented European quantitative and qualitative comparisons

In a world where people and ideas are circulating at an ever increasing pace, it is a major challenge for Europe to make its high degree of linguistic, educational and cultural diversity, a unique source of open-mindedness and cross-fertilization. Only by pointing out its diversity and combining its forces will Europe be able to create the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area (ERA) and become the leading actor in the new, knowledge-based, international landscape, as stated in the Lisbon strategy.

Following these goals, the Bologna Process and the emergence of the European Higher Education Area will enhance mobility of students and staff throughout Europe as well as co-operation and competition among European HEIs.

The Paris Conference has confirmed that, despite various shortcomings, the phenomenon of ranking has become increasingly an accepted method of evaluation as well as an expression of the performance of higher education institutions or/and their activities. Over the last decade, several attempts to rank HEIs have been made in several European countries at national or international scale. Most of them produced league tables for whole institutions which might cause high interest in media but are of little use to most stakeholders in higher education. Others, like the German ranking of the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHE), provide adequate transparency and stakeholder-orientation but include only few countries. The adequate form of transparency depends on the needs, and different groups of stakeholders:

- For students and academic staff in HEIs and research institutes information about the profiles and the performance of study programmes in Europe on Bachelor, Master, and PhD levels is important to promote mobility throughout Europe; by means of multiple, customized rankings students and staff are able to find HEIs and research institutes corresponding with their individual preferences,
- For European HEIs and research institutes instruments are necessary that allow them to compare to similar institutions in Europe both to find partners for co-operation and to identify their competitive position,
- For policy-makers, the data they need to analyze and the challenges they have to face are required, both at national and European levels.
- For European citizens and employers, transparency about the European higher education system in the world and on the diversity of HEI orientations and performances within Europe should be created.

There is no one-size-fits all approach with regard to quantitative and qualitative information and ranking. Ranking especially must be carefully designed in order to answer the specific goals and target groups while respecting the variety of the HEIs. Then, Europe has to create the appropriate instruments to meet the diversity in higher education and research

Standards for European ranking

Ranking in Europe should avoid simplistic league tables and should be based instead on comparative approach leading to the mapping of excellence in higher education and research.

European ranking should follow several principles:

- 1 – multi-dimensional approach avoiding the simplification of aggregate composite indicators.
- 2 – field based approach that is producing information about fields/disciplines and programmes as these are the levels of analysis useful both for students and academics.
- 3 – data on the local-regional integration of each HEI. Included are relevant partnerships with other HEIs (site policies), socio-economic environment, facilities, such as major public libraries or large technological platforms belonging to other institutions or national agencies.
- 4 – data collected and their processing accessible for further analysis and studies.
- 5 – independence – not steered by governments or universities but by an independent body or consortium.
- 6 – International outlook – inclusion of HEIs from other relevant world regions.

Hence, the Paris meeting fully reaffirms the 2006 Berlin IREG meeting conclusions, emphasising the following statement of the Berlin Principles:

«Specify the linguistic, cultural, economic, and historical contexts of the educational systems being ranked. International rankings in particular should be aware of possible biases and be precise about their objective. Not all nations or systems share the same values and beliefs about what constitutes “quality” in systems should not be devised to force such comparisons».

It could be useful for the stakeholders to have in parallel a typology or classification, as for example the EU supported pilot project “Mapping Diversity” coordinated by the Dutch research centre CHEPS, which aims at classifying (mapping) higher education institutions according to their respective missions: first cycle, second cycle, third cycle, more or less research intensiveness, community services, degree of internationalisation etc.

Mapping of Excellences in Europe – next steps

The French presidency calls for the mapping the different dimensions of excellence of the Higher Education and Research in Europe in an international context

It would be implemented through a independent **Consortium for Assessment of Higher Education and Research in Europe** which would cooperate with a network of national partners through which national data will be processed using shared methodologies.

The Consortium should take advantage of existing know-how and practices and develop a methodology of multidimensional mapping of the strength and excellence in education and research at the institutional level and in respective fields of study, which was developed by the Center for Higher Education Development in Germany. The mapping would cover all three levels of study – Bachelor, and (in particular) Master and PhD. The mapping should be carried out on voluntary basis. The analysis should include HEIs and research institutes.

Consequently, the French presidency invites the European Commission to launch a call for tender to explore and test the feasibility of a multi-dimensional mapping of Higher Education and Research in Europe in comparison with other relevant world regions and to provide the first results in 2010.

In addition to the need to assess research performance (notwithstanding problems in collecting internationally comparable data) there is also a need for collaborative efforts to establish valid and reliable European measures in the field of information for students on teaching and learning, as well as on other aspects of the missions of the European HEIs that deserve consideration. The

Consortium selected should deal with these issues, building on the experience gathered throughout the past years in several EU supported pilot projects and benefit as far as possible from the new university data collection project of Eurostat

The Consortium should observe the standards of integrity in line with the *Berlin Principles on Ranking of Higher Education Institutions* and rely in its work on expertise of various national and international expert groups, representatives of higher education institutions, policy-makers as well as users.