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University Rankings as an Education Policy Tool

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Аннотация

Данная статья посвящена проблеме университетских рейтингов как инструмента регулирования национальной образовательной политики, определяемой воздействием как глобальных, так и локальных процессов. Дается литературный обзор по проблеме рейтингов с акцентом на их отрицательные эффекты. В статье утверждается, что проведение образовательной политики с ориентацией на глобальные университетские рейтинги может вести к негативным последствиям для национальной образовательной системы, в частности, той системы, которая изначально основана на усиленном государственном регулировании.

Ключевые слова: рейтинги университетов, образовательная политика, глобализация, высшее образование.

Abstract

The article deals with the problem of university rankings as a tool for regulating national higher education policy, which is shaped by both local and global processes. The article gives a literature review on university rankings with a specific focus on their downsides. The article argues that excessive implementation of ranking-oriented policy may result in negative consequences for a national educational system especially the one based on strong state regulation.

Keywords: university rankings, education policy, globalisation, higher education.

The traditional approach to education had a tilt towards planning which comprised policy as its key element [8, p. 17]. However, later research into the subject matter focused on policy as a broader concept. From this perspective, national education policy serves to establish the major goals and priorities the government sets, whereas strategy tends to specify the ways of target achievement, and planning aims to lay out concrete actions as well as the timeline and resources [23, p. 6].

Since education policy is carried out in the era of change, it is appropriate to conceptualise policy in terms of what Wittrock and de Leon once defined as a ‘moving target’ [24, p. 136]. Their assumptions about the alterability of policy in changing contexts are topical today. The Bologna process, as Neave & Maasen point out, may serve as a good example of such a context, or process [18, p.138]. Its dynamics are still underpinned by difference in speed, that of the intergovernmental stakeholders and that of concrete national higher educational institutions (HEIs) whose visions may not be the same for a number of social, cultural and political reasons.

This gives implications about the nature of higher education (HE) policy of a country. On the one hand, it is shaped by global tendencies, such as competition, quality assurance, performance evaluation, and others [13, p. 20]. On the other hand, it is determined by values,

traditions and cultural patterns which manifest themselves through education [5, p. vii]. Take, for example, the famous Confucian educational model in some Asian countries characterised by an excessive governmental influence and a high public investment in research [16, p. 587].

This dual influence on education serves as a favourable environment for the implementation of such policies that help the national educational system strengthen its influence not only at the national level, but also at the regional and international levels. In this case, university rankings become a useful instrument for education policy.

Literature on the problem of global rankings and their influence on educational systems is abundant. The starting point for the influx of research is probably 2003 when Shanghai Jiao Tong University published its first ranking, ARWU. The second one, the QS WUR (THE-QS) came into being in 2004.

Although the introduction of rankings caused a high amount of publications, it was not until 2011 that the first most detailed and comprehensive study of global ratings conducted by Ellen Hazelkorn was published. As the author states, rankings are a manifestation of what has become known as the worldwide ‘battle for excellence’, and are perceived and used to determine the status of individual institutions, assess the quality and performance of the higher education system and gauge global competitiveness [9, p. 4].

The given excerpt has two important implications. First, rankings touch upon various levels of education policy: local, national, and international, i.e. they become a mechanism of activation and regulation of educational activity. Second, ratings involve a high degree of competition between participants, be that individual organisations or whole countries.

These assumptions are considered in numerous studies. Research literature on the subject can be divided into different types depending upon the criterion chosen. According to the level of education policy, research literature is devoted to either research into individual university cases [22; 20;] or the impact of rankings on national systems [11; 7], or globally [4; 12].

Research into the problem can also be split in accordance to the approach to the subject matter. Hazelkorn draws the borderline between those papers which are focused on the methodological aspect of the issue (primarily quantitative research) and those dealing with theory of rankings (qualitative research) [9, p. 10].

Another criterion for differentiation between research literature types is the degree of criticism toward rankings. It can be more neutrally, positively, or critically oriented. The analysis of literature showed that most academic articles and books on the subject, particularly of qualitative type, mostly share critical reflection. Scholars accuse ratings for their strong bias towards natural sciences and medicine [19, p. 64], a preference of HE reputation in calculations [9, p. 23; 12, p. 102], the bias towards research performance of HEIs [12, p. 103], the reliance on English as a language of research [15, p. 308], the invalidity of rankings count factors [2, p. 2; 14, p. 11], the reduction of value of HE [14, p. 12], the unification of HE systems and spread of hegemony [9, p. 17] and many others reasons.

However, Russian academic literature on the topic shows a different picture. The works in this area can be divided into two major types depending on their primary topic: those devoted to the problem of rankings in general and those which discuss *Project-5/100*, a governmental initiative whose goal is to enable five Russian universities to be in the top hundred universities of the world. Although there are some critical perspectives on the problems of rankings (see, for example, [17]), many authors do not find the root of the problem in the essence of rankings but in the imperfection of the system. For instance, some authors provide certain recommendations on how the ranking system can be improved [3, p. 9-10; 1, p. 116-117]. Some works [25; 21] lay a stress on the difference between the Russian ranking system and world systems emphasizing the necessity of complying the former with the latter.

The identified tendencies can have a few implications. One of them lies in the strong influence of the governmental education policy on academic activity. The authors take the importance of political initiatives for granted without questioning them but looking for

answers in methodological errors and inaccuracies. Another implication is the growing urge of reforms and changes within the system. The initiatives and *Project* may sound like panacea from existing problems that provide some scholars and educators with a mistaken idea of altering the situation using the Western model as an example. The particulars of the national academic traditions and culture are therewith neglected. Besides, it can also be due to the lack of access or critical evaluation of foreign literature which is still developing its theoretical framework for the novel phenomenon of global rankings.

In today's reality global rankings are considered the product of globalisation [9, p. 23]. Globalisation defined as 'the intensification of global interconnectedness' [10, p. 4], plays a unifying role in international educational policy which uses rankings as a regulatory mechanism. The original idea of rankings as a tool for students to make a choice of a prospective university has turned into an instrument of influence on the whole countries. Countries join this race for excellence in order to belong to that close circle of exceptional performance and reputation thus acquiring what Moodie called the 'Harvard here' syndrome (as cited in [9, p. 159]).

But it is not only the matter of reputation that the participants want to win but all benefits that contemporary globalisation implies. The biggest of these benefits is the increased economic wellbeing of the state. The presence of the USA and UK in top positions of the rankings makes others believe that there is a direct correlation between the positive outcomes of the nation's educational system and the outstanding performance of its economy. Contradicting to this argument, King emphasises that there is a loose connection between universities and a country's economic performance [13, p. 70]. This relationship has a reverse character, i.e. the growth of economy contributes to the quality of HE.

The problem with globalisation for a national education policy is that it is shaped in accordance to the outside influences. It has one serious negative outcome for such countries like Russia where the state-authority leadership model is practised. Universities in such nations are already viewed as 'instruments to meet national priorities' [6, p. 38]. When it comes to implementing a change, the state initiates top-to-bottom reforms and does not often consider the opinion of the local players. King points out that such a policy in its most extreme bureaucratic form, which ignores local practices, may lead to the failure of policy implementation [13, p. 76].

As a result, the policy of overregulation may lead to undesired or even unexpected consequences. It can become a no-win situation for everyone, particularly for the state which is placed in a position 'between the rock and the hard place.' It can result in less significant consequences when the policy implementation does not meet the deadline. But it can also have a more dramatic outcome, when the whole organisation or even the system can collapse. Take, for example, the practice of five-year planning of the Soviet economic system. Even education was managed in terms of rigid planning. When it comes to contemporary planning, outcomes can be fatal.

Thus, the article showed that the problem of university rankings remains topical. The initial idea of university rankings as a comparative tool has been altered making rankings a regulatory mechanism for national education policy. The orientation towards global rankings leads to several biases, such as those towards research performance, the use of English, the overrating or underrating of some disciplines. Along with accompanying processes of bureaucratisation, unification and others the desired results may not be achieved. Negative outcomes are particularly palpable for countries with strong state regulation, that is why it is of central importance for the country's HE system to analyse the prospective effects of ranking-based policy implementation instead of following global trends blindly.

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