

Report French Presidency Conference: International Comparison of Education Systems: a European Model?

Where: Paris, France, 13-14 November 2008

Participants: As this was a EU Presidency conference the main target audience was representatives of the different ministries of education around the EU. However the European University Association (EUA), the European Commission, the OECD, the European Students' Union (ESU) as well as one of the French student unions (FAGE), the International University Association (IUA), the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) were there. Education International was represented through Nina Gustafsson.

Background

The conference focused on how to compare European education on three different levels, namely compulsory, vocational and higher education. The part dealing with higher education focused on rankings and typologies/ classifications. This is also the focus of this report.

Rankings are tools used to rank order higher education institutions (HEI) according a variety of criteria. The international rankings usually rank some 500 HEI out of around 17 000 worldwide. There is also a range of national rankings and they often include all institutions in a certain country. Well-known rankings are the Shanghai Rankings (Shanghai Jiao Tong University Institute of Higher Education) and Times Higher Education Supplement. A variety of critique has been raised against the use of rankings and the way the common rankings are done. For more background and EI opinion about rankings please read the Reader for the Higher Education Caucus written for the World Congress in 2007. <http://data.ei-ie.org>

Typologies or Classifications group HEIs together according to some certain criteria in order to create groupings of similar institutions. This is said to improve information about a higher education system, as well as enhancing mission diversity and transparency. Typologies are also sometimes said to be crucial in order to do good/useful rankings, since they make it possible to only compare and rank institutions of the same kind with each other.

The reasons why these two tools have become prevalent in EU discussions on higher education are manifold. In Europe the discussion has been advanced mostly by three projects the German "Centre for higher education development" (CHE), the Berlin principles (principles on rankings of higher education institutions) and the Dutch Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies at the University of Twente (CHEPS), all with support from the European Commission. Other actors such as the OECD as well as worldwide trends towards an increased use of rankings and their increased popularity have of course also spurred the European debate. The general trend towards a more commercial view on higher education also plays an important role in putting this debate high on the agenda.

Speakers (a selection)

Below is a selection of speakers to the conference; focus is on the issues relating to higher education and rankings/typologies.

Valérie PÉCRESSE, Minister of Higher Education and Research, France

Odile QUINTIN, Director General for Education and Culture, European Commission

Frank VANDENBROUCKE, Deputy Minister, President of the Flemish government and minister of work education and training, Belgium

Xavier DARCOS, Minister of National Education, France

Annegret KRAMP-KARRENBAUER, Minister of the Sarre for Education, Family, Women and Culture – Chairwoman of the permanent conference of German education ministers: "PISA [programme for international student assessment] in Germany and its consequences"

Amelie VON ZWEIGBERGK, Education State Secretary, Sweden:

"Can we improve school achievement through extending national testing?"

Gordon CLARK, European Commission: "The key role of indicators and benchmarks supporting the future strategic objectives for European cooperation in education and training"

Jean-Marc MONTEIL, Private office of the Prime Minister, France

Workshop on HE and Ranking

Session 1

Peter VAN DER HIJDEN, European commission: "The point of view of the European Commission (DG Education) as regards the rankings of higher education establishments"

Prof. Lesley WILSON, General Secretary of the Association of European Universities:

"Thoughts of the Association of European Universities on international rankings"

Dr. Jamil SALMI, World Bank, Washington USA:

"Thoughts of the World Bank on the development of higher education and the impact on rankings"

Session 2: State of the art

Chairman: **Barbara NOLAN**, European Commission

Participants:

Prof. Frans VAN VUGHT, University of Twente, Netherlands: "Building a European classification of higher education institutions, results of a European project"

Prof. Nian Cai LIU, Director, Center for World-Class Universities and Dean of Graduate School of Education, Jiao Tong University in Shanghai, China: "Main lessons to be learnt from Shanghai ranking"

Prof. Frank ZIEGELE, Director, Center for Higher Education Development: "Main lessons to be learn from CHE rankings"

Karine TREMBLAY, OCDE: "OECD work on the assessment of higher education learning outcomes (AHELO)"

Session 3: Roundtable: References for action

Chairman: **François LE POULTIER**, CPU, France

Participants:

Gero FEDERKEIL, Manager in Charge of Rankings, CHE - Center for higher education development, Gütersloh, Germany

Ghislaine FILLIATREAU, director of OST (Observatory of Science and Techniques), France

Prof. Marijk VAN DER WENDE, Chairman of IMHE (OECD), Netherlands

Discussions:

As can be seen from the list of speakers, the panels were in general rather unbalanced and in favour of rankings and typologies. The positive aspects of rankings and typologies were underlined again and again and are seen as an information tool, a help for student and staff mobility, a way to increase quality in our higher education and research and also, albeit less outspoken, an instrument to steer funding and in general as a steering mechanism for governments to control higher education institutions. Students, staff and quality assurance agencies (also working with enhancing the quality of education, as rankings are said to do) were not invited to speak on any panel. This was heavily criticized.

Despite this there were a number of participants who raised concerns about, mainly, the rankings but also the issue of typologies. Those were for example ENQA and ESU, as well as some ministry representatives and a participant from EURYDICE. EI also raised our concerns. The majority of the ministry representatives however did not have a mandate to speak, and this issue seems not to have been discussed very much in the national ministries. Several ministry representatives expressed that this discussion was just beginning at the national level or that the minister did not have an opinion on it (Austria, Luxembourg, Romania,

Sweden). They seemed however to take a rather pragmatic or “real politik” stand on the issues – arguing that rankings are already out there and that it is thus better to make them good than to live with Times Higher and Shanghai. Hungary expressed strong concerns about the rankings and the position of East and Central European institutions on ranking scales (they are not present at all). A comment that was made several times during coffee breaks was that “the Commission/France/other EU countries want a European ranking just to be able to place European institutions at the top”.

Some participants seemed frustrated with the fact that the outcome of the conference seemed already to be decided as well as the way in which the Commission and the Presidency pushed the development of a European Ranking.

Conclusion

The European Commission is going to launch a call for Tender before the end of the year to do a feasibility study of a European Ranking system.

The French Presidency will propose and push the issue of a European Ranking system at the EU level, and so will the Flemish Minister.

The French Presidency conclusions from the conference pointed out the need for a European ranking. It can be noted that one of the French newspaper on the 14th of November announced that there will be a European (EU?) ranking by 2010.

The conclusions from the three different workshops are as follows:

WS 1 International comparison of compulsory education

SESSION 1 – ASSESSMENT OF STUDENTS’ SKILLS IN COMPULSORY EDUCATION

- The OECD is more interested in skills, rather than what students know
- Several important issues were raised:
 - o What role can Europe play? We have a huge amount of data, but this amount raises more questions and not answers
 - o A comparative assessment does not in itself lead to improvement.
 - o We don’t make full use of the existent tools
 - o We need to demonstrate the added value, in a way that is useful for our policy makers
 - o We need international comparisons – several of them
 - o Several fields of research are opening: what is valuable at each national level, how can one use several studies with different methodologies etc.
 - o Measurement in education – “the methods are already there”. Europe as a knowledge economy needs to explore this area and improve the measurement techniques.

SESSION 2 – TEACHERS AND THE ORGANISATION OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

3 issues:

- a. The political importance of teacher issues and the need for reliable and comparable data on teachers, both nationally and internationally
- b. The current difficulties in the supply of useful data and the need to use, compare and combine administrative data (system level data) and survey data (micro-level data)
- c. The issue of teacher quality and assessment can be sensitive and highly controversial

- Teacher education: pre-service education (ITE); Induction support; Continued professional development (CPD)
- Teacher time; teacher hours; overall working hours; hours of availability at school
- Teacher quality – Teacher educational teacher academic skills; level of content knowledge; pedagogical content knowledge; years of experience in teaching
- Assessment of teachers – which information?

Connecting Learning outcomes with teacher training strategy is an interesting area to explore (OECD). Using student achievement as an indicator for the teachers' quality is an interesting, but highly controversial area.

SESSION 3: INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS AS REGARDS EQUITY

Equity- equality of access, equality of results.

We need to define equity, especially if we want to use composite indicators for measuring equity.

Equity is not only a matter of funding.

Evidence based policy. Parental choice is relative.

No comments from the public.

WORKSHOP 2 – HE RANKINGS

- 13 experts presented their views
- Rankings – love/ hate relationship
- EUA posed a set of basic questions: what is a HEI? And what are its missions?
- The issue is however here, we cannot ignore it

Everyone agrees with the need for more information.

Main target group:

- Students, especially with regard to student mobility
- There are other groups, but less focused
- Dangers: using rankings for financing
- No link now with QA

We must ensure diversity and be careful about uniformity that can be inflicted in the classification boxes.

Concrete proposals:

- Data collection: Eurostat
- Mapping or classification: CHEPS project, AERES work (characteristics vs. performances, proximity vs. differences)
- Rankings: multidimensional, targeted, with a specific scope

Proposals of the scientific council of the Observatory of Science and Techniques (France)

- Work with more European states
- Mapping of the European excellence etc.

Comments from the public (both apparently taken in):

- Romania: we need to define the scope of the feasibility study exercise: EU27 or EHEA?
- ESU: we need to mention in the conference report the concerns about the rankings' impact on social mobility and equity in HE.

WORKSHOP 3 – WHICH INDICATORS FOR EDUCATION AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING

- A special focus on Lifelong Learning
- What is the objective of professional training?
- We don't have a lot of indicators about vocational training.
- 33% of the employees are undergoing some sort of professional training (France). We don't have a European estimation yet.
- PISA VET
- What is the gap between young and old workers, men and women workers?
 - this is the data we already have.

FINAL ROUNDTABLE – TOWARDS A EUROPEAN APPROACH ON INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS?

We are developing a culture of comparison.

Can we use rankings for decision-making?

Peter Mortimore:

- High stakes testing – bad, diagnostics of systems – good.
- Politicians “cherry pick” indicators, because they like “macho macro” politics and it helps them justify their moves.
- We need civil society involved
- Current indicators favour the middle class, not the underprivileged.
- Inequalities are originated in secondary education. How do we counter that?

The rest of the speakers praised rankings.

The costs for surveys, feasibility studies are very high.

Follow-up

EI needs concern itself a bit more with the issue of typologies, as well as develop argumentation to meet proposals for ranking systems that do not have the obvious drawbacks of today's systems. The aim of the European Commission is very clearly to create a “good” or “friendly” ranking that has gotten rid of all the flaws the present rankings have. EI and the affiliates need to be able to discuss and criticize such a ranking system.

EI also need to follow the developments in compulsory and vocational education.

For more information please visit: http://www.ue2008.fr/PFUE/lang/en/accueil/PFUE-11_2008/PFUE-13.11.2008/comparaison_internationale_des_systemes_educatifs_un_modele_europeen