



Statement on the development of rankings and classification in the EHEA

The Bologna Process must continue to focus on quality assurance and not on rankings and classification

ESU opposes the development of rankings and “transparency” tools in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and calls upon Ministers responsible for Higher Education (HE) gathering in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve to concentrate their efforts on quality assurance and true information for students. Students are part of the academic community, engaged in shaping their learning experience and striving to achieve high quality education by contributing to quality assurance.

The Bologna Process is founded upon cooperation and agreement between governments and stakeholders. Introducing the controversial issue of rankings and other tools as a priority for the future decade threatens these principles and undermines the nature of the Bologna Process. A European ranking system as currently being developed by the European Commission will only increase the existing gaps between the east and west, north and south of the EHEA and allow for greater imbalances and brain drain. Public funding must not be spent on developing rankings and classification that stakeholders in the Bologna Process do not require or support.

Students reject both rankings and classification of higher education institutions (HEI)

Classification does not lead directly to league table positions but acts as the basis for developing rankings. Classification initiatives set predefined profiles for HEIs, inhibiting flexibility and diversity, limiting their range of missions and ambitions and clustering them for further comparison. We strive for truly horizontally diversified HE systems and believe that putting HEIs in predefined profiles increases conformity rather than transparency and quality.

Students oppose a greater focus on competition and marketisation through the back door

Experience reveals that rankings and classification are part of the marketisation of HE. This agenda, in which students are seen as consumers instead of stakeholders, opposes European values. Under rankings and classification, the rise and fall of the reputation of an HEI gives room for adjustments in funding and tuition fees. ESU opposes the trends towards the creation of an HE market. Students are not consumers but part of the academic community and must be engaged in the learning process.

Rankings are a threat to social dimension

Using a list of mainly quantitative indicators to develop rankings and classification does not reflect the quality of an HEI. Indicators enhance the discretionary power of the ranker or classifier and, if done at European level, encompass significant language, cultural and organisational bias. Rankings and classification fail to reflect complex issues. The social dimension, for example, requires significant resources and time investment and cannot be assessed by a

The European Students' Union (ESU) is the umbrella organisation of 48 national unions of students from 38 countries and through these members represent over 11 million students. The aim of ESU is to represent and promote the educational, social, economic and cultural interests of students at a European level towards all relevant bodies and in particular the European Union, Bologna Follow-Up Group, Council of Europe and UNESCO. ESU was formerly known as ESIB – The National Unions of Students in Europe.

simplified set of indicators. Issues such as access to HE, improving study conditions and widening participation will be overlooked if HEIs have to choose between these fields and more prestigious areas like research.

Students urge for investing in HEIs' true missions and not on reputation

Rankings and classification dictate and solidify the existing perceptions of what underpins high quality HE. They pressure HEIs to perform in a reputation race chasing criteria instead of focusing on their broader mission, and thereby overlooking quality. These tools undermine trust between HEIs, affecting the cooperation, recognition and mobility between them. Ultimately, the reputation of an HEI will have a large effect on graduates' employment opportunities and will affect student choice. It will enact greater elitism by increasing selectivity and exacerbating the social divide of the student body. These tools will allow for the concentration of funding in some HEIs, making rich institutions richer and poor institutions poorer.

Students require truly relevant information for their study choices

It is misleading to claim that rankings increase transparency for stakeholders. Students need access to qualitative information relating to HEIs and programmes provided in an independent and non-biased manner. They are not a homogenous group; they have different needs and preferences and are perfectly able to use qualitative information to make their choice. Students require a greater level of information but the one provided by rankings and classification is largely irrelevant to them.

Higher education needs more quality assurance, not classification and rankings

Quality assurance is developing in Europe as a result of strong partnerships between key HE stakeholders, while recognising students as full partners. The development of rankings threatens the current emphasis on quality assurance in the EHEA. Quality assurance must continue to be the priority and with a focus on enhancing objectivity and comparison between HEIs and programmes and increasing the communication about its results to the wider public. This work must be undertaken by the relevant stakeholders; the assessment of HEIs and study programmes must be made against their mission statements and not external priorities.

Quality assurance and rankings are not complementary but rather contradictory, portraying different concepts of HE. Quality assurance is a process of building and maintaining trust. It is founded on a system of peer review to assess standards and provide for guidance and support for further enhancement. HEIs are free to build their own equally valued profiles and to be assessed against them. Quality assurance pays attention to processes and provides a thorough, informed analysis. Quality assurance is the responsibility of all stakeholders, including the full involvement of students.

Rankings bring distrust to quality assurance, taking a mere snapshot of HEIs without supporting quality enhancement and without involving stakeholders. Rankings, rather than having a positive effect – as QA is intended to – will lead to the creation of a self-fulfilling prophecy. HEIs finding themselves relegated to the lower ranks will find it even more difficult to improve the quality of the education they are delivering to students. Lower ranks make HEIs less attractive to the stakeholders involved, thereby compromising the possibility of further improvement.

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