On the function of university rankings

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Modern science is an evaluating and evaluated science: the quality of research cannot be guaranteed without an evaluation. According to the founder of the modern sociology of science, Robert K. Merton (1973), one of the norms of science is “organised scepticism”. From the 17th century onwards the peer review process was used almost exclusively at first, although since the 1980s and 1990s indicator-based evaluations have been carried out or multi-stage methods used for the evaluation of research and teaching (Daniel, Mittag, & Bornmann, 2007). The first international university ranking (the so-called Shanghai ranking) was published in 2003. This was then followed by further, large-scale indicator-based assessments of universities, which were published either as a ranking (individual institutions are ranked according to certain criteria) or as a rating (individual institutions are assessed according to certain criteria). The importance of rankings/ratings nowadays is evident from the fact that the lack of a German university among the best 20 or 50 universities in international rankings was one of the most important reasons for creating the Excellence Initiative in Germany (Hazelkorn, 2011).

Although it is often claimed that the indicator-based assessment in rankings/ratings can be used by university managements for a meaningful analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of their institutions, rankings/ratings primarily provide (1) information on the performance of universities for students and junior scientists, (2) the comparative assessment of universities – on the national and international level, and (3) an account of the universities, which are being given more and more autonomy (Hazelkorn, 2012). This is shown by a survey of university managements which was reported by Hazelkorn (2011). After students and parents, politicians are considered to be the group influenced most by rankings. Studies have been able to determine a correlation between “the quality of campus facilities and the ability to attract (international) students” (Hazelkorn, 2011, p. 103). University managements assume that “high rankings can boost an institution’s ‘competitive position in relationship to government”’ (Hazelkorn, 2011, p. 91).
Governments desire independent and objective information on where the research of a country and that of the individual research institutions stands overall. The transparency created by the numbers also has the desired side effect that the competition among the institutions (for research-related and staff funding) is stimulated (Hazelkorn, 2012) and an increase in the performance of the institutions is to be expected.

Universities and non-university research institutions have almost no need of rankings/ratings for their strategic decisions or for the internal optimisation of their performance. (Multi-stage) evaluations are carried out at the institutions for this purpose (usually based on informed peer review), which are organised either by the institution itself or by evaluation agencies (Bornmann, Mittag, & Daniel, 2006; Daniel, et al., 2007). The Max Planck Institutes of the Max Planck Society have Scientific Advisory Boards, for example, the TU Darmstadt and the University of Zurich even have their own evaluation office. Lower Saxony’s universities are evaluated by the Central Evaluation and Accreditation Agency (ZEvA) and universities in northern Germany by the Association of North German Universities (Bornmann, et al., 2006). Since these evaluations are very labour and time intensive, are hardly practicable for a large number of research institutions, and can only be carried out effectively in an atmosphere of absolute discretion, they are not suitable for a large-scale comparison of research institutions. Rankings/ratings have become established instead for this purpose. They primarily address the layperson in the general public and not the academics or the university management. Rankings/ratings are thus not important to universities as an analysis of strengths and weaknesses which can be used internally, but as a demonstration of performance to external parties (for the students/junior scientists of the future or for politicians).

Although there are meanwhile a number of “dos and don’ts” when designing rankings/ratings, there will probably never be a ranking/rating which will do justice to the
heterogeneity of the institutions covered and which is able to produce a valid image of the performance of all institutions.
References


