



# EDUCATION INTERNATIONAL

## Pan-European Structure

**Higher Education and Research Standing Committee  
Oslo, September 2006**

### **Ranking of Higher Education Institutions**

Representatives from trade unions for teachers and researchers in higher education and research, assembled in Oslo on September 27<sup>th</sup> 2006, are deeply concerned about current developments on ranking of higher education institutions, the use of these, and the discussions that are taking place thereon.

The steering of higher education institutions should not be done on the basis of ranking. The Unions present feel the need to point to a number of considerations which need to be made with respect to the consequences of setting up ranking systems.

The notion of ranking is in itself irreconcilable with the principle of equity and the diversity of educational missions which meets the different aspirations of students. The discussion on equity has always been at the forefront of UNESCO issues, and has recently gained importance in OECD and EU fora. Following effort and financial commitment targeted to ensure equal access to higher education, it is questionable whether it can then be argued that the kind of higher education obtained in one higher education institution can then be differentiated from another one, in terms of it being better or worse.

The idea of ranking also gives rise to a number of erroneous misconceptions, devaluing higher education institutions which fall towards the bottom of the list, targeting them as 'bad', and leading to the creation of a cluster of elite higher education institutions that rank at the top. There is a real risk that the ones which fall out of the latter category try to emulate the 'best' higher education institutions, in order to climb up the ladder. We reject this sort of attitude in terms of the fact that different higher education institutions operate in different cultural, historical and societal settings so that the methods employed in the governance and management of one higher education institution is not suitable for others.

The pressures of the outcome of ranking systems also deviates the attention of leaders of higher education institutions from the students and the genuine purpose and mission of higher education, enhancing competition between institutions. In this sense, there is the real risk that higher education institutions focus on efforts to climb up the ranking ladder, investing time, as well as financial and human resources therein, ignoring their mission in developing and disseminating knowledge for the advancement of society. Furthermore, ranking places too much emphasis on institutions and ignores study programmes.

Ranking is also an extremely market-driven practice, as it aims to differentiate between institutions. Such a differentiation then gives rise to situations in which higher education institutions which rank at the top feel free to impose or increase tuition fees, which again is incompatible with the principle of equity.

The idea that ranking systems enhance the notion of commercialisation of higher education is clear from the "Berlin Principles on Ranking of Higher Education

Institutions”, which are the final outcome of a project entitled “Higher Education Ranking Systems and Methodologies Project” set up by UNESCO-CEPES and the Institute for Higher Education Policy. Although we recognise these as having no legal weight, we are concerned that they refer to the notion of rankings being based on a on a measurement of “outcomes” (principle No. 8), thus output, rather than “input”, and that they refer to “consumers” of higher education (principle No.15), rather than “students”.

A final consideration to be made in terms of ranking is the issue of who is competent to decide on the indicators used in ranking. By way of example, it is of extreme concern that the discussion leading to the decision on the above-mentioned “Berlin Principles on Ranking of Higher Education Institutions” was not an inclusive one, as it did not involve a large number of stakeholders. Representatives of academic staff, among others, were excluded from this discussion.