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Global university rankings and their impact: EUA publishes second rankings report

A new report published today (12 April) underlines that the number of international university rankings and other 'transparency tools' continues to grow, with the arrival of new rankings and new products derived from rankings. Commissioned by the European University Association (EUA), the report also reveals their growing influence on universities and public policy.

"Global university rankings and their impact II" is the second rankings report from EUA, an organisation representing 850 universities in 47 European countries. It is presented today (12 April) to an audience of university leaders and higher education representatives at EUA's Annual Conference at Ghent University in Belgium.

Authored by Andrejs Rauhvargers*, the report underlines that there have been significant new developments in the field of international rankings since EUA's first report in 2011, including the launch of new rankings by established providers (including THE and QS) and a proliferation of multi-indicator tools and products for profiling, classifying or benchmarking institutions (such as the Shanghai Research Consultancy Global Research University Profiles). The approach of user-driven rankings also appears to be gaining ground, with one notable example being the U-Multirank project, which has received much attention recently.

While there have been a number of changes to their methodologies since 2011, the report confirms that the main global university rankings still focus principally on the research function of universities but that they are "still not able to do justice to research carried out in the area of arts, humanities and social sciences". Furthermore, the bibliometric indicators used still have "biases and flaws". The limitations of rankings, however, remain most apparent in efforts to measure teaching performance. Nevertheless, it notes there are signs that some rankings providers have themselves started to draw attention to the biases and flaws in the data underpinning rankings, and thus to the dangers of misusing rankings.

The growing volume of information that is being gathered on universities and the new "products" on offer also strengthen both the influence of the ranking providers and the potential impact of rankings. This growth in ranking activities also increases the pressure on and the risk of overburdening universities, as institutions seek to maintain as high a profile as possible. At the institutional level, some universities have reported that they have started to use data compiled from rankings for benchmarking exercises that in turn feed into institutional strategic planning. EUA is currently following up on the impact of rankings on institutional strategy with a new pan European project designed to study this issue in more detail and to provide recommendations on how rankings can promote institutional development while also identifying potential pitfalls that universities should avoid.

Meanwhile, the report also shows that rankings are also beginning to impact on public policy making as demonstrated by their influence in the development of immigration policies in some countries, in determining the choice of university partner institutions, or in which cases foreign qualifications are recognised.

The developments outlined in the report indicate the need for all stakeholders to reflect on the extent to which global rankings are no longer a concern only for a small number of elite institutions but have become a reality for a much broader spectrum of universities as they seek to be included in, or improve their position in one or the other rankings. This means that they have started to shape the development of higher education systems. This is a significant shift bearing in mind that most international rankings in their present form still only cover a very small percentage of the world's 17,500 universities, between 1% and 3% (200-500 universities), with little consideration given to the rest.

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Ends.

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The European University Association, as the representative organisation of both the European universities and the national rectors' conferences, is the main voice of the higher education community in Europe. EUA's mission is to promote the development of a coherent system of European higher education and research.

Notes to editors:

**Professor Andrejs Rauhvargers is a Senior Adviser to EUA and also author of EUA's 2011 report Global University rankings and their impact.*