Chapter 5
The Impact of Rankings on Russian Universities' Student Choice

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ABSTRACT

On the basis of its own hypotheses and analysis of foreign studies, the author determines how the informational and motivational functions of rankings have impact on Russian universities' student choice. The analysis of the rankings position of universities and some of their key performance indicators (the foreign students number, the quality of applicants) showed there is not any direct correlation between them. According to the author, in order to maximize the effectiveness of rankings, it is necessary to improve the ranking methodology, to develop universities' decision-making processes based on the rankings results, and to create customer culture on the rankings results using.

INTRODUCTION

To improve the quality and relevance of training and teaching, which is the primary mission of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), requires new collective efforts to be exercised by the EHEA countries against the backdrop of the current transformation of higher education (Yerevan Communique, 2015).

Expansion and growing diversity of stakeholders in the education system, as a result of academic and career mobility of students, graduates and teachers, makes the tasks faced by the universities more challenging in terms of identifying the consumers' requirements, assuring education quality, reporting and providing open and transparent information about the quality level.

Development of an independent assessment of quality as an institutional component of national education systems is a part of the most important issues involved in renewal of the EHEA.

The author assumes that an independent education quality assessment would be an effective component of national system for education quality assurance, if it were to perform guaranteeing, informational, motivational, educational, and consultative functions. This chapter focuses on researching implementation of informational and motivational functions of such type of education quality assessment as ranking. Relating to higher education rankings, the content of these functions looks as follows.

The informational function consists of informing consumers about the relative, comparative level of the universities' reputations, satisfying the needs of each individual person and society as a whole so that to provide the information they are interested in. Under the conditions, where universities are becoming rightful players in the global market, rankings are designed to furnish information for the processes of potential consumers' educational choice. Some researchers doubt the value of implementing this particular function of rankings to develop transparency and openness of the education system, in view of those undesirable consequences, which they produce, due to their inability to provide reliable and up-to-date information (Rauhvargers, 2011).

The motivational function of ranking consists, firstly, of the ability to motivate universities to enhance the reputational characteristics and to reinforce the universities accountability to society. Capability of rankings to influence the development of the education quality remains controversial; they are often criticized for simplistic approach to the issues of universities' activities, for resorting to this approach instead of thorough and scrupulous work on quality control; rankings are also criticized for pressure on universities which causes the latter to lose their individuality and national diversity. Indeed, it has to be admitted that rankings are more of a reputational management tool rather than a quality management one. Secondly, the motivational function of ranking lies in its capability of impacting the consumer preferences of the players in the market for educational services. This very impact is what this paper is devoted to.

BACKGROUND

Studies targeted at comparative analysis of the impact of rankings on higher education show that, there are many things in common in the way people in different countries react to rankings, make management decisions and act on them.

Governments exploit the motivational function of rankings to promote universities in the world education market, making them more competitive and seeking to achieve recognition of the national educational system abroad, ensuring them with appropriate funding. E. Hazelkorn underlines exclusively motivational function of rankings which play the role of social accountability, compelling universities to stick to and adopt the best practices, and based on the researcher's empirical study in Germany, Japan and Austria, there is an opinion that rankings serve as both overt or covert factors causing changes in the higher education system (Hazelkorn, 2009).

With respect to universities, the informational function of rankings is expressed, on the one hand, in providing information base for the universities themselves in identifying the best practices, and on the other hand, a university position in ranking enables the stakeholders to ascertain this university potential as a possible partner.

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