


Chapter 4

Global University Rankings in European Higher Education Policy and Practice: Institutional and National Responses From Slovenia and the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the impact of global university rankings on the development and implementation of institutional and national policies and practices in the two countries forming the European Higher Education Area. More precisely, it focuses on Slovenia and the Netherlands which are rarely in the focus of comparative higher education research. Initially, it discusses the landscape of eight selected global rankings in terms of key indicators they use and criticisms to which they are subjected. Afterwards, it investigates global (and national) rankings in the framework of institutional and national policies, strategies, and practices of each country case. In the continuation, it places the obtained results into the comparative perspective and concludes by highlighting that university rankings frequently support vertical diversity within and between (Slovenian and Dutch) higher education systems and, as such, disregard the complexity of particular disciplinary, institutional and national contexts.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter investigates global university rankings in European higher education policy and practice. By perceiving rankings as a tool for strengthening the collaboration strategies between universities and industry in the digital age, it associates its content with the main theme of this book. As concluded by the study of the European University Association (EUA) on rankings in institutional strategies, more

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than third of respondents (34%) underlined that university-industry partnerships improved because of rankings. However, due to their simplicity and consumer-type information, they have sparked the interest of various stakeholders inside and outside higher education next to the industry, namely students, institutional leadership and staff, designers of higher education policies, funding bodies, the media, and the public at large.

Therefore, it is not surprising that higher education institutions increasingly focus their attention on meeting the requirements of the world's most influential rankings. In Teichler (2008) words, 'top' universities no longer play in the national league of universities but, in the soccer terminology, they play in the Champion's League of universities. Both worldwide and in Europe, many higher education institutions (and systems) started to reshape their policies, strategies, and practices to fit the image produced by the world's 'best' universities (Hazelkorn et al., 2014; Wächter et al., 2015). In the above-mentioned EUA survey, 60% of respondents also similarly underlined that they use rankings as part of their institutional strategy (Hazelkorn et al., 2014). Given that their increasingly relevant role "stimulated significant changes in European higher education policy" (Hazelkorn & Ryan, 2013, p. 94), "now is the time for debate on the apparent influence of global rankings on higher education policy in Europe" (p. 96).

From this perspective, it is then adequate to investigate institutional and national (policy) responses to global university rankings from the comparative standpoint of Western and non-Western (European) countries, such as Slovenia and the Netherlands, which are rarely in the focus of comparative higher education research. Furthermore, comparative research in higher education is still (too) frequently oriented towards comparisons of Western (European) countries (Kosmützky & Krücken, 2014). However, with the launch of the Bologna Process and the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the need to conduct comparative studies in non-Western (European) higher education contexts also considerably intensified.

Slovenia and the Netherlands represent two out of 48 countries from the EHEA that share similarities regarding the development of the two higher education systems in accordance with the principal objectives of the Bologna Process. On the other hand, they also differ in respect to their universities' position on world's most prominent rankings. Whereas Dutch universities continuously rank among the world's 2% of universities, the best performing Slovenian university recently lost its position among the 'top 500' universities on the most influential global rankings. The selection of both countries is therefore not random but deliberate; it follows Sartori's (1991) argument that it is not sensible to confront cases which differ so much that no similarities among them can be found, nor is it sensible to compare cases which are so similar that only slight differences among them may be found.

Along these lines, the chapter explores two key investigative questions of (1) what emphasis is given to global university rankings in institutional and national higher education policies, strategies, and practices in Slovenian and Dutch higher education and (2) which similarities and differences in their institutional and national responses to (global) university rankings one may identify. As argued by Wächter et al. (2015), "the main effect that has become a concern is the way in which national and institutional priorities have been reshaped in line with rankings, sometimes in dubious manners" (p. 67).

Methodologically, the chapter provides answers to the two main questions through the analysis of multiple documentary sources addressing university rankings in (European) higher education, such as academic literature, recent international ranking studies (Rauhvargers, 2013; Hazelkorn et al., 2014; Wächter et al., 2015; Çakır et al., 2015; Liu & Liu, 2016; Kouwenaar, 2016), institutional and national strategies, programs and other policy documents, web-published content on university rankings (from official websites of Slovenian and Dutch higher education institutions and (inter)national organizations),

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