

ENID Conference

Thursday, March 4th, 16.30-18.00 hrs

## **Roundtable on Indicators and Classifications of European Universities**

The goal of the roundtable is to discuss methodological, policy-related and political issues that surround classifications, rankings, league tables, and other attempts to compare higher education institutions from national and international settings. We want to look at the classifications and rankings as such, their design and use, and also briefly at the indicators that they are based on, and their underlying data.

Classifications and rankings are *transparency tools* to describe and understand *diversity* in the higher education landscape. Diversity, in the sense of divergent institutional missions, activity profiles, and performances. The main purpose of classifications is to present a *multi-dimensional* picture of institutions in terms of their education, research, knowledge transfer activities, et cetera. Compared to classifications, rankings are *one-dimensional*, in the sense that only one type of activity is ranked or multiple activity types are aggregated into one composite rank. Furthermore, the focus of rankings mostly lies on aspects of an entity's performance – often research performance.

Sophisticated transparency tools are more than ever needed. The needs for transparency among different stakeholders in higher education are diverse. Transparency tools therefore have to be designed for those different needs. From their beginning, the main purpose of most national rankings has been to inform (prospective) *students* about universities within a country. Such national rankings focus on indicators that are thought to measure aspects of quality of teaching and learning, but some also including indicators of research and institutional reputation. Only recently, international and global league tables emerged to compare for the first time universities on a *global* scale. The best known are the 'Academic Ranking of World Universities' (ARWU) published by Shanghai Jiao Tong University, the Times Higher Education/QS World Ranking, and the bibliometric Leiden Ranking, designed by the Center for Science and Technology Studies (CWTS, University of Leiden). These examples are a reflection of a growing international competition in particular in *research*, and largely focus on comparing research performance of universities.

It is widely recognized now that, although the current transparency tools—especially university league tables—are controversial, they seem to be here to stay, and that especially global university league tables have a great impact on policy makers, as well as on universities. They reflect a growing international competition among universities for talent and resources. At the same time, rankings reinforce competition by their very results. On the positive side, they urge decision makers to think bigger and set the bar higher, especially in the research universities that are the main subjects of the global league tables. Yet, major concerns remain with respect to the methodological underpinnings of rankings and their impact on

stratification in the higher education system, rather than on the diversification of institutional missions.

All of the participants in the roundtable are working on projects that aim to build transparency tools for higher education and research systems. All, in one way or another, make use of institution-level data and indicators, presenting this in ways that allow for comparing research groups, higher education institutions, or maybe even entire higher education systems. The list of their projects looks as follows:

- **CHE Ranking (Gero Federkeil)**
- **EUMIDA (Andrea Bonaccorsi, Stig Slipersaeter)**
- **European research university Observatory (Stig Slipersaeter)**
- **Leiden Ranking (Robert Tijssen)**
- **U-Multirank project (Koenraad Debackere, Robert Tijssen, Gero Federkeil)**

These projects go beyond the national level and try to highlight diversity in the system, even across national borders, to enable stakeholders like students, institutions, and policymakers to get a clear picture of differences between institutions. In the roundtable we will discuss these classification/ranking projects in order to work out more general implications for the design of transparency tools. What lessons can be learned from the above projects? What standards need to be observed when selecting the dimensions/indicators in the classifications and rankings? What data concerns do we need to be aware of? What use can classifications and their indicators have for policy-makers?

Some of the issues we would like to discuss in the round table are:

1. Rankings and classifications: the difference
2. The users of classifications
3. Dimensions for classifications/rankings and their underlying indicators
4. Data, definitions, and other concerns
5. Classifications and policy-making

Members of the audience are most welcome to express their views and intervene during the roundtable. The discussion will be moderated by Ben Jongbloed (CHEPS, University of Twente).