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# One size fits all? A different perspective on university rankings

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**ABSTRACT**

In roughly a decade, university rankings gained the foreground in the policy arena for higher education and their influence is not going to decrease. However, several methodological shortcomings and warnings about the unintended consequences for national higher education systems have been raised. Against this background, this paper stresses that the individual recipients of information contained in university rankings are currently overlooked. Indeed, university rankings are addressed to a generic recipient, but actually, there are multiple audiences for rankings, and each of these audiences has different needs and each one attributes a different value to information attached to rankings. Referring to a theoretical tool borrowed from bioethics, this paper highlights that the ranking game involves a variety of recipients and that the current setting of the ranking panorama leaves room for gaps to emerge.

**KEYWORDS**

Ethical matrix; higher education system; indicators; university rankings

## Introduction

The impact of university rankings in the policy arena for higher education is quite recent, but is increasing. As shown by the media coverage of each annual release of the famous Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE) or national league tables, rankings have a great appeal, meet the thirst of the public for status competition among countries and institutions and, despite several critiques received, they became increasingly popular and embedded in political discourse. Their power lies in providing a simple, easy-to-use reference, which has a great influence on moulding policy-makers' decisions, and they have contributed to spread a world-wide conversation about the role, values and future of higher education (Hazelkorn, 2007, 2014).

Nonetheless, there is a body of literature highlighting the methodological problems of rankings (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007; Paruolo, Saisana, & Saltelli, 2013; Saisana & d'Hombres, 2008; Saisana, d'Hombres, & Saltelli, 2011; Soh, 2013a, 2015; van Raan, 2005) and the concerns related to the implications in terms of institutional design and unintended consequences for national higher education systems (Aust & Musselin, 2014; Hazelkorn, 2014; Kehm, 2014; Sauder & Espeland, 2009).

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Given this background, this contribution proposes an alternative interpretation framework, building on a very basic – but often overlooked – question: 'Who is served by ranking and for whom are they important? (Kehm, 2014). The paper stresses that university rankings are addressed to a generic recipient, a sort of 'one size fits all'. Actually, there are multiple audiences for rankings, each one bearing different needs, expectations and each one attributing a different value to information attached to rankings. The side of the recipients of information contained in university rankings is currently overlooked by the literature, and this contribution will shed light on the existence of different stakeholders involved in the ranking game. It can also be argued that the current setting of the ranking panorama leaves room for gaps to emerge, with some stakeholders (e.g., research-intensive and elite universities) well served by the current leading rankings (e.g., ARWU and THE), while some others groups, as the broadest but less organised audience of 'users' (e.g., students and families), are not well provided for with the information currently available in rankings.

## The background for an alternative approach to university rankings

The success and pervasiveness of university rankings have generated a vigorous debate about their methodological limitations and about the organisational consequences they could bring about. The section below presents the most recent literature on these two aspects claiming for a new way of looking at university rankings.

### *Methodological criticism*

University rankings are basically composite indicators, where weighted arithmetic averages are linearly aggregated, with the purpose of measuring university performance (Paruolo et al., 2013). As for all composite indicators, university rankings are subjected to normative assumptions about the type of variables and associated weightings. Thus, ranking systems reflect the conceptual framework and the modelling choices used to build them: their outcomes reflect assumptions, values and norms shared by the developers, as well as the purpose by which they have been set up (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007; van der Wende & Westerheijden, 2009). Methodological problems may rise when the way in which the composite indicator is constructed introduces biases, depending on one characteristic (e.g., the size of the university, the presence of Nobel prizes) which is likely to influence the result. Although it has to be acknowledged that most of the developers are quite explicit in presenting the weighting procedures behind their rankings, an arbitrary attribution of weights which are at the basis of rankings may have a relevant influence on the outcome. Recent research has shown that also internal discrepancy is a major concern when approaching rankings from a methodological standpoint (Paruolo et al., 2013). In fact, internal discrepancy between the target (what the ranking wants to measure) and the effective importance assumed by a variable within the indicator may be high, leading to results that do not actually measure what was explicitly stated as the purpose of the ranking. By comparing the internal discrepancy of the two most famous university rankings, ARWU and THE, Paruolo et al. (2013) show that the latter perform worse than the former, with most of the problems affecting the key variables: peer-review based variables have a larger

importance than what actually declared by developers and the variable indicating teacher/students ratio is much less important than what it should be. In addition, the discrepancy between nominal and attained weights has also been pointed out as a serious concern. According to Soh (2013a, 2013b, 2014) it misleads rank consumers and gives wrong indications to university managers on which activities it is better to invest in, in order to boost the ranking of their institution, efforts which in the end risk being poor or unrewarded. The simple method of weighting raw indicator scores with different distributions and then summing them up to a single overall score generates misleading information since the indicators are based on different metrics (Soh, 2013b). Standardising the raw scores to assure the same mean and standard deviation before summing up represents a fair improvement for university rankings, also contributing to preventing unfruitful efforts of university managers directing resources to the wrong indicators (Soh, 2013b).

Among the methodological criticisms raised on university rankings, the lack of statistical significance among ranks has also been pointed out (Saisana & d'Hombres, 2008): the search for an easy-to-communicate number through the media, emphasising a sharp divide among positions, often results in an allocation of ranks that does not always correspond to statistically significant differences in data.

In addition, the strong influence on research performance and bibliometric indicators has been criticised for several reasons. First, it makes current ranking systems biased in favour of certain categories (English-speaking, research-intensive in the field of science, comprehensive universities) at the expenses of others. Second, the strong focus on research performance in rankings is based on an underlying assumption of correspondence between quality of research and quality of teaching. However, the relationship is not straightforward and a high-scoring university in the domains associated with research does not automatically guarantee a high-quality level of teaching (Dill & Soo, 2005). More recently, new evidence has been provided on multicollinearity and redundancy problems affecting the indicators used to compute the final overall university rank. Indeed, using THE data Soh (2015) highlighted that the underlying assumption that all indicators contribute independently to the overall score is often violated and that some of the indicators do not even contribute at all to the overall score, calling into question the methodological reliability of the overall rank. In addition, using principal component analysis Kaycheng (2015) finds that the indicators used to build the rankings of ARWU, THE and QS WUR (Quacquarelli Symonds World University Rankings) reveal a hidden structure behind the overall ranking, comprising at least two factors. In most of the cases, these factors are negatively correlated, and even antagonistic, thus not supporting the claim of mutual compensation of indicators made by ranking providers and the additive logic with which university rankings are built.

Moreover, the focus of university rankings on institutions as a whole as unit of analysis and on their research performance has broader consequences. First, it tends to overlook and hamper the different missions and goals which characterise each higher education institution (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007; van der Wende & Westerheijden, 2009). Second, it also tends to mask high degrees of internal heterogeneity, in particular when large comprehensive universities in unitary or low differentiated systems of higher education are considered (Meek, Goedegebuure, Kivinen, &

Rinne, 1996). As an example, Regini and Colombo (2013) and Agasisti and Bonomi (2014) show that Italian universities demonstrate high levels of heterogeneity in research and teaching performance, against the formal equality of status that institutions enjoy, typical of the unitary model. Building on the results of the Italian national research evaluation exercise (VQR), Regini and Colombo (2013) highlight that differentiation emerges not at the level of university as a whole, but rather at the stage of the single research department within each university. In fact, referring to Abramo, Cicero, and D'Angelo (2012) they show that scientific productivity in Italian universities (analysed through bibliometric criteria and limited to the hard sciences) shows a higher variance *within* the same university rather than *between* universities. This is further supported by the fact that over one-third of Italian universities are in the first 500 positions of world university rankings (Regini & Colombo, 2013), suggesting that quality is not concentrated in few universities, and the system has high levels of dispersion of excellence.

The work developed by Agasisti & Bonomi (2014) deals with the teaching performance of 12 universities located in the Lombardy region in the north of Italy. It shows that when efficiency scores measured at school level are compared to efficiency scores measured at university level, the rankings diverge significantly, with most of the universities showing lower scores when efficiency is measured as a sum of school-level scores. These results support the idea that the university is 'the sum of different sub-organisations rather than a single institution: a university that operates in *n* fields can be highly efficient in one (or more) of these fields and inefficient in others. The overall efficiency of a university cannot be represented by the simple mean value of the performance of its sub-units' (Agasisti & Bonomi, 2014, p. 1240). As a consequence, results per institutions are not fully informative and may lead university managers to sub-optimal or misleading decisions.

It has to be acknowledged that some efforts have been made in this direction by both ARWU and THES, which recently introduced rankings by subject or field of study, along with overall performance rankings. However, the appeal of these side rankings remains limited while the world ranking at university level is still undoubtedly the benchmark.

## Organisational consequences

Despite the several critiques raised, university rankings have been and are still pervasively influential in the field of higher education, with relevant effects on the organisational behaviour of single universities and with implications at system level. It also seems that no university is sheltered by this race to the top: top universities have to compete year by year to secure their top positions, investing lot of economic and human resources; universities in lower positions or not included in the ranking are under pressure to get promoted or to be visible. Ironically, most of these efforts turn to be frustrated since mobility upward and downward is quite rare and even little changes in data collection can result in big changes in the ranking position. As Kehm (2014) reports, universities have very little power in controlling their position and, although almost all aspire to be among the upper echelons, the positions at the top (in particular at the international level) are dominated by the same names, and institutions risk

implementing consciously or unconsciously, processes of isomorphism and convergence that will not in any case grant them success.

Several authors concluded that the impact of rankings on universities' behaviour is undeniable (Hazelkorn, 2014; Kehm, 2014; Rauhvargers, 2014), but with both positive and negative outcomes. On the side of positive outcomes, it has been highlighted that ranking contributed to reawaken the discourse about higher education, moving it out of domestic affairs and putting it in a wider comparative international framework. In this sense university rankings contributed to bring at the foreground the issue of modernisation of the higher education systems and acted as a 'wake-up call' for many national systems, challenging self-perception and making them aware that the range of the competition is now at global level (Hazelkorn, 2014). In more practical terms, rankings also positively contribute to a systematic and reliable collection of national data on higher education institutions at the international level which had not previously been available and contributed to more informed policy-making (Rauhvargers, 2014).

Less positive effects have also been observed (Aust & Musselin, 2014; Hazelkorn, 2014; Rauhvargers, 2014). At the governmental level, university rankings tend to reinforce the gap between well-endowed selective universities and public, mass universities (those meeting most of the higher education demand). Indeed, most of the recent reforms have aimed at designing more homogeneous and vertically stratified systems, with a small number of world class universities, mainly created through mergers, concentrating resources and public attention. This represents a move away from the traditional egalitarian model, which characterises many of the European higher education systems, based on public universities, equally funded by the State, geographically widespread and with low levels of selectivity.

An example of how rankings can affect institutional design is provided by Aust and Musselin (2014), studying the French case. Their work shows how the growing importance of university rankings have played a significant role in reshaping the national higher education system and in establishing the evaluation criteria of competitive processes, which eventually reinforce *that* institutional design. The interesting point raised by the study is that rankings have imposed a winning model of how higher education systems should be designed and set the rules to be followed in order to compete in this academic race. However, rankings have also worked as an element of external legitimacy for implementing reforms that were already there since time, but lacked political support. The growing interest for rankings – and the poor performance of French universities – settled the conditions for a rupture with the past, providing a narrative legitimising the need to reform the national system. Since the rules of the game are settled by rankings and the French system lacked the characteristics awarded by ranking (large comprehensive universities, strongly focused on research, especially in the scientific fields, publishing in English-speaking journals), the reforms implemented in the period 2005–2011 stressed the idea that it would have made French universities able to compete on equal terms with research universities at the top. This evidence highlights the fact that the relationship between university rankings, policy-makers and academics is more complex than what it seems: it is a two-way relationship in which undoubtedly rankings affect organisational behaviour but in turn, actors themselves used rankings as a source of external legitimation of their reforms.

Another interesting piece of work on the effects of rankings on institutional organisation, which also considers the role of agency (Crouch, 2005), is the one by Sauder and Espeland (2009). Drawing on neo-institutional literature and, in particular, on the concept of *decoupling* between formal reception of prevailing organisational models and actual informal practices (Di Maggio & Powell, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1977), they show that rankings are a kind of unavoidable environmental pressure, or that are not easy to assimilate only through a process of symbolic adaptation. Although empirically limited to law schools, the study shows that rankings, as a 'commensurate, relative and broadly circulating measure' (Sauder & Espeland, 2009, p. 65), influence the way actors make sense of their profession and provide external constituencies with an easy-to-use tool for the accountability of universities: rankings offer 'incentives that are simultaneously seductive and coercive' (Sauder & Espeland, 2009, p. 64). Nonetheless, the influence of rankings is not homogeneous for all organisations: it is mediated by actors and institutional features. In fact, the administrators surveyed showed different degrees of reaction: from superficial enforcement to manipulation of statistics or attempts to renegotiate the terms of the competition. It also depended on the rank of the school or the determination of the university leadership: top rank schools tend to be concerned about any small change in the ranking order, while low-ranked or excluded schools push to change their mission in order to improve their limited chances of being included. In a few other cases, schools were able to ignore the pressure since they had little to lose. Eventually, the vast majority of schools had to invest enormous resources to manage ranking policies and manipulating strategies diffused broadly.

These unintended side effects have been studied by Kehm (2014), who shows that some adverse effects generated by the pressure of rankings are already observable. As an example, a market for research stars is already in place, in which highly cited scholars or Nobel Prize winners are appointed with part-time or temporary affiliations by well-endowed universities, offering high salaries associated with low commitment (Kehm & Erkkilä, 2014). It has been depicted as a sort of brain drain process from low-ranked institutions in favour of top performing and/or well-endowed institutions which can attract the best scholars at all levels, thanks to their reputation and favourable working conditions. This will re-enforce the 'Matthew effect' (Merton, 1968) by which high-status institutions can attract the best scholars, the best students, and high levels of funding and donations, further securing or improving their position at the top. In general, it has been noticed that once learned the rules of the game, institutions tend to re-shape their priorities to fit the ranking criteria (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007) rather than rankings being at the service of higher education, and that the high pressure associated with ranking positions is a potential incentive to opportunistic behaviours and to manipulation of data (Kehm, 2014).

## A theoretical exercise on university rankings

The widespread assumption that university rankings can provide genuine information and inform student choices or policy-makers' decisions is challenged by the several limitations previously mentioned. Therefore, taking decisions relying only on the rank associate with a single institution may lead to sub-optimal decisions (Saisana et al., 2011). The underlying assumption in the current academic and political debate is that

the type of information provided will suit the needs of a generic audience, a sort of 'one size fits all' that can serve any type of need. However, this paper will highlight the heterogeneity of the audience for university rankings, and that decision-making at all levels can benefit of a greater attention to the different stakeholders involved and eventually, leads to a richer environment of more customised university rankings.

## Ethical matrix

The ethical matrix is a conceptual tool developed since the mid-1990s by Ben Mepham, a professor of bioethics at Nottingham University and then further applied to several case studies (Kaiser, Millar, Thorstensen, & Tomkins, 2007; Mepham, Kaiser, Thorstensen, & Millar, 2006). This conceptual tool has been used primarily in the food and agriculture sector in order to help decision-makers to reach shared agreements about ethically sensitive issues (e.g., the adoption of prospective and sometimes controversial technologies). The ethical matrix allows all groups affected by the decision at hand to be included in the deliberative process and to set up the grounds for discussion based on principles and ethical codes commonly shared in Western societies.

In practice, the ethical matrix is a table built on a number of *prima facie* ethical principles placed in columns (respect for wellbeing, autonomy and fairness) and a set of interest groups (social groups potentially affected by the technology) placed on rows (see Figure 1). Prima facie principles are those ethical principles commonly shared and evident (the expression comes from Latin, meaning at 'first sight'), which are also defined as 'rules of action that are valid at first appearance' (Mepham et al., 2006). Since ethically sensitive issues are generally at stake when using ethical matrixes, the standard principles used are:

(a) wellbeing, defined as maximising the good;
(b) autonomy, representing deontological concerns;
(c) fairness, defined as respect for justice (Mepham et al., 2006).

Groups placed in the rows are those groups affected or potentially affected by the technology under scrutiny; they can be social groups such as citizens or farmers, but can also be 'non-human' animals or wild-life. The basic structure of the ethical matrix can be adjusted in order to fit the issue at hand better, but while the three principles

| Respect for: | **Wellbeing** | **Autonomy** | **Fairness** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Producers** | Satisfactory income and working conditions | Managerial freedom | Fair trade laws |
| **Consumers** | Safety and acceptability | Choice | Affordability |
| **Treated organisms** | Welfare | Behavioural freedom | Intrinsic value |
| **Biota** | Conservation | Biodiversity | Sustainability |

Figure 1. An example of an ethical matrix. Source: Mepham et al. (2006).

tend to be stable and varied in few cases only, the choice about what and how many interest groups to place in the rows is decided case by case.

In practical terms, ethical matrixes are used to compare how the adoption of a certain technology may impact on a certain group with respect to a certain principle. Therefore, each cell contains an evaluation of the potential impact of the adoption of that technology on that specific interest group, under one of the three ethical principles. The evaluation can be expressed in both facts and values: facts require a quantitative measurement of the actual impact of the technology. However, attributing an exact and reliable number/quantification may be complex and potentially tricky, since empirical evidence can be highly controversial. Thus, value judgments tend to be more commonly used, in which researchers (or participants) attribute positive or negative impact 'not only dependent on quantifiable consequences, but on the value attributed to them' (Mepham et al., 2006, p. 13), or in which the specification of each cell is defined in terms of expectations or needs. The final ethical judgment should include a wider scrutiny of the entire issue at hand and should be the result of a deliberative process empirically carried on following the structure of the ethical matrix.

Ethical matrixes are typically used in public participatory exercises, workshops and open consultations in which representatives of each group can intervene and express their opinion with respect to the principles considered. However, the potential of the ethical matrix can also be exploited for a theoretical exercise on university rankings. Thus, the practical tool of ethical matrix underlines the active role of the subject in interpreting the message provided by university rankings.

## *A new way of looking at university rankings*

The approach presented in the previous section is relevant to the argument inasmuch as it allows the topic of university rankings to be approached by including all the relevant stakeholders. Currently rankings are addressed to a generic recipient, providing a sort of 'one size fits all' type of information. However, since the impact and diffusion of rankings are supposed to be even further pervasive, it is important to emphasise that there are multiple audiences for rankings, each one bearing different needs, expectations and each one attributing different values to information attached to rankings. Thus, this section aims at shedding light on the different priorities and values that each group attaches to university rankings by means of an ethical matrix. When applying the tool of ethical matrix to university ranking, each cell should contain an evaluation of the potential impact determined by the adoption of a certain technology (which in this case is university ranking) on that specific interest group (e.g., students and families), under one of the three ethical principles included.

Table 1 provides a customised version of the ethical matrix about university rankings: the standard ethical principles as elaborated by Mepham et al. (2006) are in the columns, with wellbeing being conceived in terms of utility or benefit. The rows show all groups that are potentially affected by the phenomenon of ranking, including ranking providers.

The content of the cells is not expressed in terms of numbers, since university rankings are not a specific technology the impact of which can be quantified in a straightforward manner. Rather, in this case cells contain the expectations and needs

Table 1. Ethical matrix for university ranking.

| Respect for: | Wellbeing (benefit) | Autonomy | Fairness |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Students and their families** | Accurate, reliable, plural and multi-dimensional information | Choice<br>-of sources of information;<br>-of type of institution | Equality of opportunities |
| **Universities** | Reputation, students, funds | Institutional autonomy | Encompassing representation of the institution as a whole |
| **Governments** | Informed decision-making; cross-national benchmarking | Freedom in policy design | Reliable and transparent data |
| **Ranking providers** | Growing business, market success | Independence | Transparency |

Source: Author elaboration from Mepham et al. (2006)

that each interest group may attach to the introduction of university rankings in the game. Accordingly, the matrix was filled in taking into consideration the key issues per each group when thinking in terms of benefits (first column); autonomy (second column); fairness (third column).

Analysing the key issues for *students and their families* (first row of Table 1), it is said that university rankings should guide prospective students through the tough choice of which undergraduate or graduate programme to pursue (Bowden, 2000; Cornwell, 1996; Gunn & Hill, 2008; Hou, Morse, & Shao, 2012; Manns & Swift, 2015; Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 2009). However, the most popular rankings focus on research-dependent indicators only. It can be assumed that the great majority of students and their families are interested on comparing universities in terms of teaching quality, study support and services for student life, while an interest in research performance might emerge at a later stage in those who want to purse academic career. Thus it is reasonable to hypothesise that in terms of *wellbeing*, students and families would benefit from accurate and reliable information about the different dimensions of the university, above all teaching-related aspects, which contribute to informed decisions about which university to attend. Also, in terms of *autonomy*, they may be interested in having an array of choices among both plurality of sources of information and type of university. Autonomous choices can be made if alternatives are available: on one side plurality of (reliable) sources of information helps defining own preferences, as well as the possibility of choosing the own type of degree among different types of higher education institutions. Preserving the variety of missions of higher education institutions improves the autonomy of choices of students who can better match their expectations and are not forced to face a single winning model. Similarly, preserving a high level of equal opportunities of accessing higher education is a key issue in terms of *fairness*. It is reasonable to hypothesise that the desired outcome for students and families under the 'fairness' column will be that the competitive pressure generated by the ranking game will not negatively affect equality of opportunities in access to higher education.

From this a potential gap emerges for students and their families: they will be interested in having (reliable) sources evaluating in detail all the functions of universities, in particular teaching quality and associated services, together with some

information on equality of opportunities of access (such as selectivity rate, costs and occupational returns). In addition, country-level rankings could be usefully informative for students, since not all students will take into consideration cross-border mobility. However, key information on learning processes and outcomes is missing in most of the university rankings (Dill & Soo, 2005); are not found in ARWU, which pretends to measure teaching quality by the number of alumni who won Nobel prizes; nor in THE ranking, which uses indirect proxies and is subject to the typical methodological shortcomings of reputational surveys.

The second row relates to *universities*, with their vice-chancellors/presidents and top administrators as the principal consumers of university rankings (Soh, 2015). It can be assumed that each university would benefit from well-designed rankings in terms of reputation, students and funds attraction. If the university is among the highest ranked ones it gains in terms of reputation among peers and among students, leading to a potential increase in funds, from sources such as student fees, donors and the national government (if the latter has in place a system of performance-based funding). In addition, universities newly included in rankings and those ranked in medium-low positions can benefit from the benchmarking function of rankings, as 'an opportunity to analyse their strengths and weaknesses and to introduce processes for improving their performance' (Agasisti & Bonomi, 2014, p. 1238). In terms of *autonomy* they will expect that the ranking will only represent a functional tool they are free to adopt or not, and that their institutional autonomy of organising teaching, research and institutional governance will be preserved. In this paper, institutional autonomy has been given an operational meaning, which foresees the fulfilling of the universities' tasks and functions through managerially oriented decision processes, in line with the definition by Neave (2009). In this framework it can be hypothesised that universities would maximise their *wellbeing* if rankings mainly have a guidance role and are not too invasive in institutional and strategic decisions taken at university level. In terms of *fairness*, given the relevant role rankings have in the allocation of reputation and associated benefits, it can be supposed that universities desire fair and reliable rankings, based on stable and transparent procedures of data gathering and measurement. Besides, since universities are aware of the multiple missions they have to pursue, we can suppose that they are interested in assessing their performance according to all the multiple functions they perform, providing an encompassing view of the institution as a whole, rather than being skewed on one activity only.

In this respect, single universities may be interested in having multiple rankings reflecting the vast array of functions and domains were excellence could potentially lay in. The main objective is to provide a detailed representation of the whole institution and its full potential, while single rankings trying to summarise performance in a single domain can lead to under/overestimation of the actual potential.

The release of ARWU and THE rankings by field of study or subject goes in this direction, as well as the European U-Multiranking project, carried out by the CHERPA network, which compares institutions according to each single dimension of university's activity. Research-intensive institutions or universities which decided to strengthen their research potential may benefit from research-only rankings, such as the Leiden Ranking (provided by the Centre for Science and Technology Studies at the Leiden University), or the HEEACT Ranking (provided by the Taiwan Higher

Education Accreditation and Evaluation Council Ranking) (Rauhvargers, 2013). However, U-Multiranking suffers the limitations of self-reported data, and research-only rankings suffer the typical biases mentioned earlier.

*Governments* are the third interest group introduced in the matrix. In terms of *wellbeing*, governments can benefit of benchmarking function of rankings for cross-national comparisons, for supporting the decision-making process and for designing better-informed policies. Unlike the case of students, given the stress on the benchmarking function, it can be assumed that governments would benefit from a concise and comprehensive measure of the overall performance at system level, perhaps split by function (research, teaching, innovation or technology transfer). As for universities, it can be assumed that governments also desire a high degree of freedom in terms of institutional arrangements, together with the assurance that rankings are built on reliable and transparent data.

Governments cannot ignore the impact of the most popular university rankings (such as ARWU and THE) on the media, but they might also be interested in a more encompassing reflection on all the missions universities pursue, thus being concerned about additional outcomes of universities, beyond research (such as occupational outcomes of graduates, innovative potential and technology transfer outputs, or efficiency). Finally, governments may be concerned about country-level rankings, as these could be the starting point for the design of performance-based policies for the allocation of funds. In order to benchmark their higher education system as a whole and, within the system, to identify the peculiarities of each institution, governments may find it meaningful to combine the traditional rankings with other tools.

On the fourth row *ranking providers* (companies or research centres) are also listed among the stakeholders, since they clearly have interests in this matter. They benefit from the increasing spread and success of their products in terms of growing business, market success and revenues. On the other side, since reputation and reliability are key features for the success of a university ranking, it is likely that providers desire to preserve their own independence from any type of external pressure (whomever it comes from: universities, organisations or governments). Similarly, it is reasonable to hypothesise that they want the data provided to be transparent, reliable and systematically available, so to convey a final product that meets both high demand and quality standards. Thus, ranking providers may be interested in having one dominant ranking, possibly their own, enjoying high credibility and wide application, so that data can be gathered easily and systematically and that universities desire to be evaluated. Actually, this is more or less the current situation, with few global university rankings (ARWU and THE) acting as market leaders and setting the trends in higher education policies.

Nonetheless, the current situation of hegemonic power of some ranking providers and of subtle competition between them is not a desirable situation, given the long list of methodological shortcomings and the adverse consequence on organisations' behaviour. At this point, it may be desirable that *researchers* in the field of university rankings enter the game playing the critical role of 'watchdogs'. Scholars who have long experience in analysing the structure of rankings and their consequences may perform several important roles.

First, they may monitor ranking providers, ensuring that they correct the methodological problems currently affecting rankings. These undermine the reliability of the

indicators from a scientific standpoint and thus, revisions are needed for the sake of the common good of knowledge (Soh, 2013b). Yet, university rankings as they are do not deliver what they promise to do: their misleading information may generate negative consequences in terms of unrewarding and fruitless efforts by university administrators, governments and in some circumstances, students. This critical role is particularly needed if we consider that university rankings have been pretty stable and unchanged all along the decade, despite the rich literature available dealing with methodological issues. Thus, 'rank providers need to take heed of the various criticisms and thereafter render a better service to their clientele by regularly reviewing and modifying their operations to improve and refine their products' (Soh, 2015, p. 305).

Second, researchers in the field of university rankings should provide some forms of consumer-education in order to equip them with the tools needed to develop their own critical thinking. Consumers of university rankings (whoever they are, university administrators, ministers or students) should be made aware that rankings do not have to be taken as the truth itself and it is recommended that, against any enthusiastic press release announcing the winners and the losers of the ranking game, they use caution and a critical attitude on how the overall rank has been computed (Soh, 2013b, 2015).

Methodologically speaking, the ethical matrix contributes to identifying the different needs, priorities and expectations associated with the different actors involved in the ranking game. However, currently not all interest groups receive the same type of attention. In particular, the broader but less organised audience of users (students and their families), is often overlooked and underserved. Thus, some gaps seem to emerge, welcoming a plurality of rankings, each one fulfilling different functions, which can only positively contribute to the difficult task of guiding, assessing, evaluating and reforming higher education systems.

## Conclusions

In this paper the aim was to contribute to the debate about university rankings by proposing an alternative way of looking at them. The search for the 'best' single ranking may be misleading: given the coexistence of different needs, expectations and priorities that characterise each of the stakeholders involved in the ranking game, the paper maintains that the 'one size fits all' approach is not the most appropriate one when dealing with university rankings. Rather, the field may better benefit from a plurality of university rankings, each one serving different (but equally important) functions and answering different demand niches.

The background for this argument is represented by the several criticisms that have been addressed to the current ranking panorama: rankings are not exempt from methodological limitations and biases, the 'perfect ranking' is far from being reached and probably, it is not even a desirable outcome. In addition, given the impact of university rankings on the organisation and behaviour of universities and national systems, in some cases even leading to adverse effects, it is important to be aware of the great pressure generated by 'seductive and coercive incentives' (Sauder & Espeland, 2009, p. 64) which however are not flawless and are not exempt from interpretation issues. As shown, the ranking game involves a variety of participants: several

stakeholders with different values, needs and priorities whose plurality demands a plurality of answers. In this view, a plurality of rankings should be welcome, first because different rankings would underpin different dimensions and serve different demands (already there but currently overlooked); second, because a plurality of rankings may contribute to make less urgent the imperative of a single winning model, lowering down the pressure for reshaping the organisation and behaviour of universities. Finally, an active role of researchers in the field of university rankings is desirable, for monitoring improvements on methodological issues and for making better-informed ranking consumers.

By highlighting the existence of different (sometimes competing) values and needs in the ranking game, this paper proposes a new way of looking at university ranking: not supporting the search for the best one, but pointing at emerging gaps in the way the different stakeholders are provided for the information they need, with some groups better served (elite universities, ranking providers) and some others overlooked (students, families and, to some extent, national governments).

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