

Education

Debating the merits of university rankings

PARIS

Those who compile lists confronted their critics at a recent global forum

BY D. D. GUTTENPLAN

When Nan Cao Liu and his colleagues at Shanghai Jiao Tong University decided to compile a list of the world's 500 leading universities back in 2003, their aim was simply "to find out the gap between Chinese universities and world-class universities, particularly in terms of academic or research performance."

To minimize controversy they decided to use only indicators that could be quantified: the number of Nobel Prizes or Fields Medals awarded to an institution's faculty or alumni; the number of papers published in two leading scientific journals or cited in other published research. To avoid the taint of partiality, they would use only data collected by other organizations.

Yet the effect of their investigation on the academic landscape was roughly akin to what would happen if, lost in a fireworks factory, you decided to light a match to find your way out.

Though some universities found ample grounds for satisfaction — Harvard has been at the top of the Shanghai ranking since the survey began — others were less flattered. And since this was the first large-scale effort to rank universities without regard to national boundaries, there were unwelcome surprises, and cries of outrage, from countries whose flagship universities were nowhere to be seen on the horizon.

Shanghai soon faced a host of competitors, with the most prominent, the QS-THE World Rankings, a marriage between the educational services company Quacquarelli Symonds and the Times Higher Education Supplement, ending in divorce in 2009.

There are now rankings that measure everything from the prominence of universities on the Web — the Webometrics ranking, sponsored by the Spanish Ministry of Education — to dozens of national comparisons published by magazines and newspapers. Institutions that do well trumpet the tidings,

hoping to turn enhanced prestige into greater government support or increased donations from status-conscious alumni. Those that do less well try to challenge the rationale by which the complex business of educating students, inculcating a culture and enabling cutting-edge research can be boiled down into a single number.

The reverberations from the explosion set off by the Shanghai researchers could be heard very clearly at the global forum on "Rankings and Accountability in Higher Education" held at Unesco headquarters in Paris this month. Delegates from 68 countries spent two days debating the uses and misuses of rankings as, perhaps for the first time since 2004, representatives from all of the ma-

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jeor international ranking organizations, and many of the national ones, confronted their critics. Although, since this was done under the auspices of Unesco, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and the World Bank, and almost all of the participants were academics, the confrontations were mostly intellectual rather than physical or emotional.

Even so, there was palpable tension in the auditorium when the conference keynote speaker, Ellen Hazelkorn, vice president of research at the Dublin Institute of Technology, delivered a shorter, blunter, but no less damning version of the indictment set out in her recent book, "Rankings and the Reshaping of Higher Education." Although conceding that "rankings appear to be a simple and easy way to measure performance," Dr. Hazelkorn warned that appearances were deceptive.

Reminding the audience of Einstein's dictum that not everything that counts can be measured, she asked, "Do rankings measure what counts?" and whether "they actually raise standards," as their proponents claim. She suggested instead that by increasing the emphasis on factors like reputation,



In her keynote address to the forum on university rankings, Ellen Hazelkorn of Dublin Institute of Technology warned lists were deceptive.

medical and scientific research (which may be too expensive for many universities), faculty productivity and the entry level of incoming students, rankings might actually "undermine a broader vision to provide education."

For a university to do well in the rankings, Dr. Hazelkorn said, "age and size matter." The tables are dominated by a "small league of well-endowed universities, in English-speaking countries, usually with a medical school," she said. And while the ranking organizations say their research is aimed at prospective students or administrators, politicians have been quick to seize on rankings to justify radical changes to funding.

Criticism also came from those countries that feel not only shut out but ill-

erved by the ranking process. Imanol Ordorika from the National Autonomous University of Mexico said that none of the international rankings pay attention to the effect of higher education on social mobility, a crucial priority in much of the developing world. Nor, he said, did they consider the role of a university in building the nation. "Yet throughout Latin America, we have seen universities generate the policy ideas that gave birth to our nations," he said. "In Mexico after the revolution, the universities provided physicians, ministers of public health, engineers."

Calling the spread of rankings "a homogenizing force" Dr. Ordorika warned: "They push our policy makers to copy Harvard. It's not that we can't

have Harvards everywhere. It's that we don't need and don't want them."

His objections were echoed by Najib Abdul Wahed, deputy minister of higher education in Syria, who urged the delegates to go beyond the model of a university dominated by research to allow for "a teaching model, a developmental model, or an entrepreneurial model" in which success would be measured by more diverse goals than simply getting Nobel Prizes or producing reams of published research.

But the case for the defense was equally robust. Phil Baty, deputy editor of the Times Higher Education magazine, conceded that "rankings are rather crude; they can't be completely objective," adding that "governments

should treat them with real caution." He insisted, however, that "as long as they are serious and transparent, rankings can be a useful tool."

Ben Sowter, director of research for QS, Mr. Baty's main competitor, agreed with critics that rankings "were designed on an Anglophone model of what a university looks like." But he also said that with 3.4 million students studying outside their home countries, his organization was committed to "helping international students make more informed choices."

"Rankings are a democratic instrument," said Gero Federkeil of the Center for Higher Education, a German research organization that publishes its own rankings of German universities. "They offer information to young people who come from a family background where they don't have university-educated parents who can assist them," he said.

Despite their disagreements, few of the delegates would argue with Barbara Ischinger, director for education at the O.E.C.D., who said that the phenomenon of rankings was a byproduct of "the shift from a world where higher education was reserved for an elite few, to a world where in many O.E.C.D. countries it has become the norm."

Nor did any of the delegates seem to expect rankings would go away. But many seemed to endorse the call by Jamil Salmi, higher education specialist at the World Bank and author of "The Challenge of Establishing World Class Universities," for a move toward a less narrow set of measurements. Dr. Salmi said it would be futile, and mistaken, to try to go back to the era before rankings. Instead he urged researchers and policy makers to establish benchmarks that can be used as more accurate gauges of performance.

Instead of generating a league table of elite universities, benchmarks would look at the whole higher education system of a country. "You could then compare the performance of that system with other systems," Dr. Salmi said.

Such an approach would be more useful because "you could also compare similar institutions both within and across national borders. That would help to identify and transmit the best practice," he said.

BRIEFLY

Education

Taiwan hopes to draw more foreign students

Trying to attract foreign students and academics, the Taiwan Parliament last week approved spending 5.68 billion Taiwan dollars, or about \$197 million, over four years for a program to make its higher education system more competitive globally.

"The scheme focuses on creating a friendlier environment for the international students while marketing Taiwan's higher education credentials," said Tony Lin of the Education Ministry, according to a government report.

Taiwan's government is hoping to more than double the number of visiting university students, to 95,000, by 2014, according to the statement, issued Thursday.

The ultimate goal, it said, is for foreigners to make up about 7.5 percent of total students studying in Taiwan, a rate comparable with Japan, Malaysia, Singapore and South Korea.

"It's a good and important plan to attract outstanding foreign students to study in Taiwan," said Hsu Rui-Hong, director of the International Education Department at the Taiwan Education Ministry.

Funds will go to creating more English-language degree programs as well as a system that allows foreign students to work in Taiwan under long-term internship programs.

CHRISTOPHER F. SCHUETZE

Soon-to-be M.B.A. holders report increase in job offers

More graduating M.B.A. students are finding jobs in 2011 than they were in previous years, according to a study published this month by the Graduate Management Admission Council.

"It's a positive sign," said Laria Walker, regional director for the council. "It's an indicator that things are headed in the right direction."

According to the survey, for which 4,794 soon-to-be M.B.A. graduates filled out an online questionnaire, 54 percent had already received at least one job offer three months before graduating. Within the graduating class of 2010, just 32 percent had a job offer when the same study was conducted last year.

The survey found that 67 percent of students attending universities in the Asia-Pacific region had job offers, compared with 54 percent for the United States and 46 percent of students in Europe.

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For-profit college group assailed on recruiting

NEW YORK

Whistle-blowers claim unqualified students are sought to reap federal aid

BY TAMAR LEWIN

In 2004, when Todd S. Nelson was chief executive of the University of Phoenix, the largest for-profit college in the United States, he signed a \$9.8 million settlement with the Department of Education, which found that Phoenix had "systematically and intentionally" broken the federal rules against paying recruiters for students.

Mr. Nelson is now chief executive of the nation's second-largest for-profit college company, Education Management Corp., or EDMC, and the Justice Department and two state attorneys general are intervening in a whistle-blowing lawsuit charging that EDMC also violated a ban on what is known as incentive compensation. That practice encourages aggressive recruitment of unqualified students for their federal student aid.

Given the individuals involved — along with Mr. Nelson, a half dozen former Phoenix executives are now at EDMC — the complaint against EDMC says that "senior management knows that the compensation system it administers violates the incentive compensation ban."

Phoenix never admitted any wrongdoing, either in the settlement with the Education Department or in a later \$78.5 million settlement in the whistle-blower suit that had led to that inquiry. Education Management, which enrolls about 150,000 students at Argosy University, Brown Mackie College, South University and in its Art Institutes, has said it plans a vigorous defense.

"We feel very comfortable, based on the advice we got from our lawyers, that it does not violate the law," Anthony J. Guida Jr., EDMC's senior vice president for regulatory affairs, said of the compensation plan.

Mr. Nelson joined the company in 2007 and had nothing to do with designing the pay policy that went into effect in 2003, Mr. Guida noted. The chief executive before him was Jock McKernan, a former governor of Maine who still serves as chairman of the board. A company spokeswoman said neither Mr. Nelson nor Mr. McKernan was available for interviews.

The government's unprecedented intervention in such a compensation case comes amid escalating controversy over for-profit colleges. Enrolling about 12 percent of the nation's higher education students, the colleges get a quarter of all federal student aid and account for

nearly half of all student loan defaults.

Harris Miller, president of the Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities, said the for-profit colleges' higher default rates were in part attributable to their serving lower-income students than other institutions.

The industry, which gets more than three-quarters of its revenue from federal student aid, has been under increasing scrutiny from federal officials.

"Once you get to a certain size and saliency, a lot more people start paying attention to you," Mr. Miller said.

The complaint against EDMC charges that its compensation plan is very much like the one at the University of Phoenix, which the Department of Education found in 2004 "provides substantial incentives to its staff to recruit unqualified students."

According to the complaint, EDMC's pay plan is based entirely on enrollment numbers, with additional factors mentioned in company policies serving only as window dressing. "It's a boiler-room telemarketing scheme, where your

With only about 12 percent of U.S. higher education students, for-profit colleges get a quarter of federal student aid.

numbers are all that counts," said Harry Litman, a Pittsburgh lawyer representing the whistle-blowers. "That's O.K. for telemarketers, but it's not O.K. in education."

Mr. Guida said that he could not discuss specific accusations in the complaint, but that the plan was designed around what is known as a "safe harbor" in the law that says a recruiter's pay can take into account how many students are brought in, as long as that is not the sole basis for the pay.

Some for-profit executives are puzzled that the Justice Department is intervening in the case at a time when the "safe harbor" in the law is about to be closed: under Education Department regulations that take effect in July, recruiters can no longer be compensated for each student they enroll, even if their enrollment numbers are not the sole basis for the pay.

Mr. Miller's group has sued the department, arguing that the new rules overreach its authority.

With the explosive growth of the for-profit sector, the sums involved are immense. Education Management received more than \$855 million in federal student aid in 2003 and 2004. According to the complaint, in the fiscal year ending June 30, 2010, it received more than \$2.2 billion in federal student aid, representing 89.3 percent of its net revenue.

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