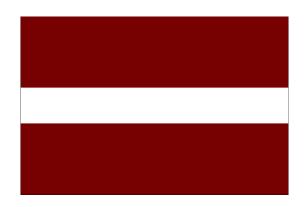THE EU AND THE WORLD: NEW CHALLENGES AND TRENDS

27 IDEAS FROM THE ERASMUS GENERATION

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EU Higher Education System: diversity with a common purpose

By

Jeļena Isajeva

Rihards Blese

The University of Latvia

Rihards Blese

+371 26453009

rihards.blese@gmail.com

Jeļena Isajeva

+371 28448242

jelena.isajeva01@gmail.com

In past two decades world's economic and political structure has been going through series of changes related to rising and declining trade values in different regions, rising of regional powers, emerging of new world level economic and possibly in near future political powers, such as China, India and Brazil. At the same time the "old" powers, namely the USA and European countries, have been experiencing considerable downturn of their economic and political capabilities. In Europe this was mainly resulted by its economic struggles and series of crisis in EU member states, which considerably weakened not only EU economic power, but also its political influence in the world system.

It is likely to argue that in existing world economic and political system country's or region's ability to produce innovations in industry, management, public administration and other fields is one of the most important resources for development. For EU innovations are necessary to maintain and fasten its role as a leading world economy and to successfully compete with arising world powers. They might also help to overcome EU own problems in financial sector with not only smaller loses, but also with some gains in form of better structured and more integrated economic system, better coordination between member states and equal development of different regions of the Union.

The ability of the region to produce innovations depends on various aspects. Nevertheless, one of the most important and basic elements in a success of innovative thinking is a system of higher education. Nevertheless, this system not only produces grounds for all innovations in the region, but requires innovations itself. The better and more competitive received education is the better chances are that graduates will trigger development. Therefore, it can be agreed that the quality of higher education that European youth receives is vitally important for EU development in the future. However, during last years statistics has showed reasonable stagnation in European innovation production.[1] It can indicate that EU Higher education system has reasonable problems that prevent it from adapting fast enough to the current situation and develop.

European countries have been taking significant steps in assuring improvements in the field. In a year 2010 it had resulted in, and since then has developed under, the program of EHEA (European Higher Education Area), which unites all EU countries and 15 other countries of the region, along with such institutional members as European Commission, Council of Europe, UNESCO and others.[2] Nevertheless, the paper's authors will argue, that further steps must be taken on EU level in bringing more coherence and equality in its education system, but at the same time, that EU should not forget about its biggest goal and advantage, which is expressed in a motto: "United in Diversity".

Therefore, this paper will argue, that to see considerable development in the field of higher education and innovation bringing institutions, EU higher education systems in different EU member states should be brought closer together under unifying platforms, but at the same time, this process of equalising mustn't merely develop more or less same system in all the states, but rather it should construct such a platform of procedures that will help to stress stronger points of the universities in

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[1] Van Vught F., *The EU Innovation Strategy: Key Challenges for European Higher Education in the Next Decade,* (Viewed 26.04.2012.).

[2] European Higher Education Area official webside, http://www.ehea.info/, (Viewed 26.04.2012.).

different EU regions, thus allowing all member states to equally contribute their own specific knowledge and innovative ideas in a common EU market. Authors will as well specifically look at the present situation in EU Higher Education Institution's ranking systems to identify some of the problems that smaller regional universities face. It is important, because the problems prevent the small member states from sufficient development and contribution to the EU common good. It will be argued, that this problems are crucial to overcome on a road to more efficient EU higher education and that it could be done only on EU level.

At present "responsibilities for universities lie essentially in the Member States at national or regional level. Nevertheless, the most important challenges facing the universities, by contrast, are European, and even international or global. Excellence today is no longer produced or measured at the national level, even in the biggest European countries, but at the level of the European or world community of teachers and researchers." [3] One of the most executed ways how to measure this excellence is by making rankings which grades universities by different aspects.

"In recent years university rankings have become increasingly important worldwide; the number of global rankings has grown [..] and it is predicted that it will keep growing. Rankings went global in 2003 when Shanghai Jiao Tong University published the results of the first global university ranking" [4]. Now there are many global and also local university rankings in the world. Besides already mentioned university ranking, best known are[5]:

- Times Higher Education World University Ranking
- World's Best Universities Ranking
- Global Universities Ranking – Reitor
- EU University-Based Research Assessment – AUBR Working Group
- Leiden Ranking
- Performance Rankings of Scientific Papers for World Universities
- CHE University Ranking
- CHE Excellence Ranking
- U-Map classification
- U-Multirank ranking
- Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (OECD)
- Webometrics Ranking of World Universities

All these rankings can be grouped in to three main categories[6]:

- University rankings whose main purpose is to produce league tables of top universities only
- University rankings concerning research performance only – with or without league tables
- University rankings and classifications using a number of indicators with no intention of producing composite scores or league tables

As university rankings are very attractive to media, general public, governments and other stakeholders, it is important to provide all these parties with adequate

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[3] European Commission, *The role of the universities in the Europe of knowledge*, Communication from the commission, 2003., http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2003:0058:FIN:en:pdf, p. 9., (Viewed 26.04.2012.).
[4] Rauhvargers A., *Global university rankings and their impact*, European University Association, 2011, p. 11.
[5] Ibid, p. 12.
[6] Ibid

information about the meaning of the numbers and the universities position in them. Nevertheless, it is important to understand, that not all types of rankings can provide result that adequately reflects the real situation. University landscape in European Union is very diverse and it should be regarded as advantage not the opposite. In 2003 diversity was set as one of the ways how EU can compete with other great economies of the world. Each member state need "to identify the areas in which different universities have attained, or can reasonably be expected to attain, the excellence judged to be essential at European or at international level. This type of policy would make it possible to obtain appropriate quality at national level in certain areas, while ensuring excellence at the European level, as no Member State is capable of achieving excellence in all areas."[7]

The problem lies in fact that different university world rankings do not see the diversity as a positive aspect. These rankings just "indicate a few hundred universities which are the 'best' in the world. In so doing, they have created problems for the thousands of 'normal' universities which simply do their job, such as training specialists for the labor market and conducting fundamental or applied research. The current rankings disease seems to have created a need to be ranked, because 'if you are not in the tables – you don't exist'. It should be possible to change the rankings substantially to allow more HEIs to be 'in'. This is especially important for those institutions that have been created with a special function, for instance to serve the region in which they are located or to provide higher education to adult students or those working alongside their studies." [8]

With the current situation of rankings universities tend to "improve their performance specifically in those areas which are measured by ranking indicators." [9] That means that instead of improving overall performance, resources are spent on these specific areas to be noticed by those who are creating rankings. For example, European Students Union emphasizes that running for rankings can "divert much-needed attention away from quality assurance which provides a much more balanced, comprehensive and accurate picture of institutional performance and educational standards. It also creates a well-founded fear that such a system would set HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) in a competitive reputation race that would distort their focus away from providing a student-centered learning experience to one that would position them higher up in a league table."[10]

There are around 17000 universities in the world[11] and 4000 in Europe[12], but only 500 – 1500 of them are in the global league tables. 'Normal' universities can't get in to these rankings, because they are not the top research universities (most of them regional and local) and are evaluated in absolute numbers. In this case small universities have no chance to be noticed in these kinds of rankings. Taking into account that EU has 23 official languages it is important to mention that also region and language is important obstacle for universities to succeed in rankings, because

[7] European Commission, *The role of the universities in the Europe of knowledge*, Communication from the commission, 2003., http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2003:0058:FIN:en:pdf, p. 18., (Viewed 26.04.2012.).
[8] Rauhvargers A., *Global university rankings and their impact*, European University Association, 2011, p. 16.
[9] Ibid, p. 15.
[10] ESU, *Rankings? No thanks!*, http://www.esu-online.org/news/article/6001/313/, (Viewed 26.04.2012.).
[11] Rauhvargers A., *Global university rankings and their impact*, European University Association, 2011, p. 13.
[12] European Commission, *The role of the universities in the Europe of knowledge*, Communication from the commission, 2003., http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2003:0058:FIN:en:pdf, p. 5., (Viewed 26.04.2012.).

"global rankings favor universities from English-language nations because non-English language work is both published and cited less."[13] So there is a need for a way how to support the diversity of universities around Europe, but at the same time to show the qualities of each of them.

For this reason in 2006 the Berlin Principles on Ranking of Higher Education Institutions[14] were created. The main issues that were covered by these principles were:

- Purposes and Goals of Rankings
- Design and Weighting of Indicators
- Collection and Processing of Data

One of the statements suggests: "Recognize the diversity of institutions and take the different missions and goals of institutions into account." [15] This supports the idea that universities have to be evaluated by their "fitness to purpose". So it is better to use classification and benchmarking instead of rankings. This is important for EU, because in this way it is possible to see the horizontal diversity of HEIs and make smart support for strategic profiling. This is also a good way to identify comparable institutions[16]. These findings can be seen as a good base for reasonable benchmarking, which is useful for finding the best practice.

The most appropriate form of rankings that can come close to reach the goals mentioned above is the one that uses a number of indicators with no intention of producing composite scores or league tables. [17] Rauhvargers points out that only "few rankings address the broad diversity of types and various missions of higher education institutions", but "new attempts to develop classifications, rankings and ratings targeting all higher education institutions and their various missions, such as the AUBR EU Assessment of University-Based Research, U-Map, U-Multirank and AHELO, all aim to improve the situation."[18]

Authors will take a closer look on two (U-MAP, U-Multirank) of suggested rankings because the rest are not evaluating whole study process in the universities. The "AUBR is not a university ranking; it is a methodology for the assessment of university-based research." [19], but the AHELO is OECD's project with a purpose "to compare HEIs internationally on the basis of actual learning outcomes." [20]

"U-Map is an ongoing project in which the European classification of higher education institutions is further developed and implemented."[21] With a simple visualization U-Map helps to compare HEIs using six indicators: teaching level and subject focus, student body, research intensity, knowledge exchange, international

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[13] Rauhvargers A., *Global university rankings and their impact*, European University Association, 2011, p. 15.
[14] Centre for Higher Education, *Berlin Principles on Ranking of Higher Education Institutions*,
http://www.che.de/downloads/Berlin_Principles_IREG_534.pdf, 2006., (Viewed 28.04.2012.).
[15] Ibid., p. 2.
[16] Ziegele F., *Imperative of Data Collection for Strategic Profiling and Performance Improvement: Using Classifications, Rankings and Benchmarkings*,
http://www.highereducationmanagement.eu/images/stories/Frank_Ziegele_updated_version.pdf, 2012, (Viewed 28.04.2012.).
[17] Rauhvargers A., *Global university rankings and their impact*, European University Association, 2011, p. 12.
[18] Ibid, p. 68.
[19] Ibid, p. 73.
[20] Ibid, p. 75.
[21] *Welcome to U-Map,* http://www.u-map.eu/, (Viewed 28.04.2012.).

orientation and regional involvement.[22] Main obstacle for U-Map is "lack of internationally comparable data [..] and Europe-wide agreed definitions of terms"[23].

"U-Multirank is a new international transparency tool which is multi-dimensional, multi-level and user-driven. Because of these characteristics it differs substantially from all existing higher education rankings and addresses the needs of various stakeholders in higher education."[24] „U-Multirank follows the development of U-Map and will cover all aspects of HEIs work. Within the U-Multirank framework two kinds of rankings are being developed:

- Focused institutional rankings that allow for comparisons of institutions along a single dimension of institutional activity, such as education, research, regional involvement, etc.
- Field-based rankings that allow for comparisons of study programmes in the same scientific/study field in a group of institutions with a similar profile."[25]

U-Multirank will measure university performance in traditionally non-covered dimensions: regional engagement and knowledge transfer. [26] „However, it is too early to tell how these new tools will work; they are still at various stages of development or pilot implementation, and both (U-Map, U-Multirank) of them still face difficult issues, particularly problems of data collection and the development of new proxies."[27]

One of the ways how to deal with the challenges of developing these two alternative university quality and strength evaluation and comparison tools is to address the issue on EU level by creating joint database and research ground. This database could be run by European Commission or other EU institution, which responsibility and focus is to support EU functioning as one entity. It could be made mandatory for the member states to submit necessary information about their universities' specific fields of competence, which also would trigger innovative thinking in the universities, making them define their own priorities and strengths, as well as helping each member state to better understand its role and value in the EU higher education landscape, which is incredibly important especially for small countries.

When developed, this database will allow the existing systems of evaluating and grouping of the HEIs to raise their effectiveness by using accurate and full information about each HEI in EU. This initiative could reasonably decrease research costs, which will allow to issue more diversified comparison and grouping of European HEIs, as well as to "dig deeper" in each university's specific areas of importance, that EU could use in the search for innovations.

The other way of solving the described problem is to develop EU university classifying, ranking and benchmarking system. Whole cycle (from data gathering stage to report publishing) should be run by EU institutions. The system will allow the EU institutions to get a closer insight in to the actual innovative recourses that EU has. This deeper understanding of the innovative recourses is necessary, because it

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[22] Rauhvargers A., *Global university rankings and their impact*, European University Association, 2011, p. 73.
[23] Ibid, p. 73.
[24] *U-Multirank: a multi-dimensional global university ranking,* http://www.u-multirank.eu/, (Viewed 28.04.2012.).
[25] Rauhvargers A., *Global university rankings and their impact*, European University Association, 2011, p. 74.
[26] Ziegele F., *Imperative of Data Collection for Strategic Profiling and Performance Improvement: Using Classifications, Rankings and Benchmarkings,* http://www.highereducationmanagement.eu/images/stories/Frank_Ziegele_updated_version.pdf, 2012, (Viewed 28.04.2012.).
[27] Rauhvargers A., *Global university rankings and their impact*, European University Association, 2011, p. 68.

will allow to make more accurate financial planning, spending recourses in the field and on the programs that really need it, and may be saving some important projects and initiatives, which otherwise would have vanished unnoticed because of the lack of resources and funding.

Nevertheless, to implement any of the two suggestions, broad consensus among member states is needed about the necessity to devote financial, human and time recourses to this kind of policies. All of the EU countries must also be certain about the favorable outcomes of the policy to each of them. One of the obstacles on the way of getting such consent could be the anxiousness of the countries, especially the small ones, that such a system will result in even bigger homogeneity of the HEIs. Therefore, EU institution's task would be to make an emphasis on the very purpose for the action, which is to save the specific originality of all HEIs, including small local universities, by making them visible contributors in common EU goals. European University Association (EUA) has stated that diversity should be valued and EU should draw maximum benefit from these differences.[28] EUA also emphasize that EU should accept "that not every institution can carry out top level research across all disciplines, the goal in Europe should be to increase the number of universities which are excellent in what they do in specific areas, and not merely to concentrate more resources on an increasingly limited number of institutions at the expense of the others." [29] It should be mentioned that EUA has stick to these ideas over time under slogan: "Diversity with a common purpose" [30], which is a good way of thinking about the future of the system of higher education in EU. Regarding this, also ranking system should mirror the diverse landscape of EU HEIs.

Concluding the brief insight in one of the problems of the EU Higher Education and, as a result, innovation field stagnation, it is important to remind, that the authors base their views and perception of the future of EU Higher Education System in the motto of EU: " United in Diversity" and the slogan of EUA: "Diversity with a common purpose". The authors believe, that one of the most important tasks of EU is to stay diverse, maintaining all possible regional and local features. But authors are aware of that the only way how to do it in the globalized and competitive world is to come together and cooperate, enlightening each other's strengths and with joint effort overcoming weaknesses. And the authors want to emphasize that, improving the ranking system, is only one small step in to the direction of reaching the goal of strong, but at the same time diverse Europe.

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[28] EUA, *RESPONSE TO THE COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION The Role of the Universities in the Europe of Knowledge*, http://www.eua.be/Publications.aspx, p. 2., (Viewed 28.04.2012.).
[29] Ibid p. 4.
[30] EUA, *Europe's Universities beyond 2010: Diversity with a common purpose*, http://www.eua.be/Publications.aspx, p. 4., (Viewed 28.04.2012.).

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2. ESU, *Rankings? No thanks!,* http://www.esu-online.org/news/article/6001/313/, (Viewed 26.04.2012.).
3. EUA, *Europe's Universities beyond 2010: Diversity with a common purpose*, http://www.eua.be/Publications.aspx, (Viewed 28.04.2012.).
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6. European Higher Education Area official webside, http://www.ehea.info/, (Viewed 26.04.2012.).
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9. Van Vught F.,*The EU Innovation Strategy: Key Challenges for European Higher Education in the Next Decade,* (Viewed 26.04.2012.).
10. *Welcome to U-Map,* http://www.u-map.eu/, (Viewed 28.04.2012.).
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