

**Press release: Embargoed until 11am (Central European Time) Friday 17 June 2011**

## **European University Association (EUA) publishes first review of major international university rankings**

A report published today (17 June 2011) argues that the main international university rankings provide an “oversimplified picture” of institutional mission, quality and performance, as they focus mainly on indicators related to the research function of universities .

It also underlines that the benefits these rankings offer, be it through fostering accountability or encouraging the collection of more reliable data, are outweighed by a lack of transparency and by “unwanted consequences”. Such consequences include a growing tendency for universities to invest in activities that will improve their position in the rankings rather than in core areas such as teaching and learning.

“Global university rankings and their impact”, a report commissioned by the European University Association (EUA - an organisation representing 850 universities in 47 European countries) has been presented today (17 June) to an audience of university leaders and higher education experts in Brussels. EUA commissioned this report as a response to the recent growth in international and national rankings, and as a result of increasing questions from its members requesting information and advice on such rankings. The report does not aim to ‘rank the different university rankings themselves’ but analyses the methodologies used and also refers to a number of other ongoing projects seeking to measure university performance.

It is clear that despite their shortcomings, rankings are here to stay, the report notes, quoting a recent European Commission report, that they “enjoy a high level of acceptance among stakeholders and the wider public because of their simplicity and consumer type information”. Predicting a rise in the number of rankings in the future, the report argues that it is vital for universities and different stakeholders to be aware of the degree to which rankings are transparent, and from a user’s perspective, of the relationship between what it is stated is being measured and what is in fact being measured, how the scores are calculated and, even more importantly what they mean.

The report also points out that international rankings in their present form only cover a very small percentage of the world’s estimated 17,000 universities, somewhere between 1% and 3% (200-500 universities), completely ignoring the rest. Looking to the future it should be possible to “democratize” rankings to allow more institutions to find their place. The present rankings favour large research intensive institutions. Therefore, this is especially important for those institutions that focus more on serving their region or providing higher education to ‘non-traditional’ students. Including more universities could be seen as a way of “recognizing the important contribution of those well-functioning institutions that suffer from the ‘unwanted consequences’ of rankings”.

There is clear evidence that attempts to measure the quality of teaching and learning that involve the use of proxies, often with a very indirect link to teaching quality, are ‘rarely effective’, while the importance of links to external stakeholders and environments are largely ignored. More recent European initiatives are seeking to broaden the focus of rankings to cover the broader missions of the university. In order for these to be successful, however, internationally comparative data is needed and this is proving difficult at the present time.

The report also points to some positive aspects of rankings; explaining that they have focused considerable attention on higher education, and have helped to foster greater accountability and to increase pressure to improve management practices, and at national level also can foster the

collection of more reliable data. It also acknowledges that efforts are underway by the ranking providers to improve the methodologies they use.

The EUA Rankings Review project was made possible by funding from the Robert Bosch Stiftung and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation

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An embargoed copy of the report is available on request

The European University Association, as the representative organisation of both the European universities and the national rectors' conferences, is the main voice of the higher education community in Europe. EUA's mission is to promote the development of a coherent system of European higher education and research.

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