

EUA CASE STUDIES 2015

# **EUA MEMBERS' PARTICIPATION IN U-MULTIRANK: EXPERIENCES FROM THE FIRST ROUND**

BY TIA LOUKKOLA AND RITA MORAIS

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## Introduction

The first results of U-Multirank (UMR), a multi-dimensional ranking of higher education institutions produced with seed funding from the European Commission, were unveiled on 13 May 2014. EUA has followed the development of U-Multirank since its beginning, most recently through membership in the Advisory Board. UMR has also been discussed by EUA's governing bodies on a number of occasions and these discussions have demonstrated that a great variety of views on UMR exist among universities and their representatives: while some have great expectations of UMR and believe in its values, others have expressed major concerns about the initiative. Therefore, it was concluded that EUA should remain vigilant and monitor the project, but without taking a clear stand in favour or against it.

After the launch of the first UMR results, the EUA Board found that a short membership consultation would be useful. This would be an opportunity to ask universities about their experiences with UMR, not only their expectations or views on how the initiative might work. Thus, the secretariat carried out a short survey of individual EUA members in early autumn 2014. The results of the study are presented in this report.

## Background on U-Multirank and EUA members' involvement

UMR is a multi-dimensional ranking of higher education institutions developed by a consortium led by the Centre for Higher Education (CHE) and the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) at the University of Twente. Other partner organisations include the Centre for Science and Technology Studies from Leiden University (CWTS), Catholic University Leuven, Elsevier, Bertelsmann Foundation, Push and Folge 3 (UMR website).

UMR was launched at the initiative of the European Commission. Following a feasibility study finalised in 2011 (van Vught 2011), the Commission explained the rationale behind U-Multirank as follows:

a new performance-based ranking and information tool for profiling higher education institutions, aiming to radically improve the transparency of the higher education sector, with first results in 2013. By moving beyond the research focus of current rankings and performance indicators, and by allowing users to create individualized multidimensional rankings, this independently run tool will inform choice and decision-making by all higher education stakeholders (EC 2011).

UMR received a total of €2 million in EU funding from the Lifelong Learning Programme in 2013-15, with the possibility of a further two years of seed-funding in 2015-2017. However, during this period, in addition to further developing and implementing the UMR the consortium is also expected to devise a long-term business plan that would allow an independent organisation to run the ranking thereafter (UMR website).

With regard to the methodology of the ranking, the aim is to reflect the multi-dimensional nature of a higher education institution and so UMR's indicators cover 5 areas:

- teaching and learning,
- research,
- knowledge transfer,
- international orientation and
- regional engagement.

In addition, there is some general information related to the size and age of the institution (UMR website).

The data included in UMR are drawn from the following sources:

- provided by the institutions directly,
- international bibliometric and patent databases and
- student surveys (completed by students at participating institutions) (UMR website).

The 2014 UMR edition included the following fields: business studies, electrical engineering, mechanical engineering and physics. In 2015, UMR will be expanded to cover psychology, computer science and medicine (UMR website).

879 higher education institutions from Europe and beyond were included in the 2014 edition of UMR. While over 70 countries are present in the UMR, around 62% of the institutions are from Europe. Over 500 of the institutions actively provided data for UMR in its first round. The rest are included in UMR only

through bibliometric and patent data that have been drawn from publicly available sources. Bibliometric data included are based on the Thomson Reuters database (UMR website).

Comparison between the universities included in the UMR published in May 2014<sup>1</sup> and EUA members<sup>2</sup> shows that just less than half of higher education institutions (42%) included in the first results of UMR are EUA members. On the other hand, taking only into account the EUA membership, almost half of EUA members (47.1%) are included in UMR, whether by actively providing data or through publicly available data. Out of these institutions, 77.5% actively provided data to UMR, while 22.5% were included through publicly available data (see Tables 1 and 2).

<b>EUA members included in UMR</b> (active participation or through publicly available data)	<b>EUA members not included in UMR</b> <b>at all</b>	<b>Total EUA members</b>
369 (47.1%)	414 (52.9%)	783 (100%)

<b>Active participation</b>	<b>Included through publicly</b> <b>available data</b>	<b>Total</b>
286 (77.5%)	83 (22.5%)	369 (100%)

<sup>1</sup> A list provided to the UMR Advisory Board in spring 2014, is also available at [http://eurofundsnews.eu/files/2014/05/U-Multirank\\_2014\\_Master\\_list\\_of\\_institutions.pdf](http://eurofundsnews.eu/files/2014/05/U-Multirank_2014_Master_list_of_institutions.pdf) (last checked on 13 January 2015).

<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this study, EUA members include individual full members and individual associate members (data retrieved from EUA database on 07.08.2014).

## Survey results

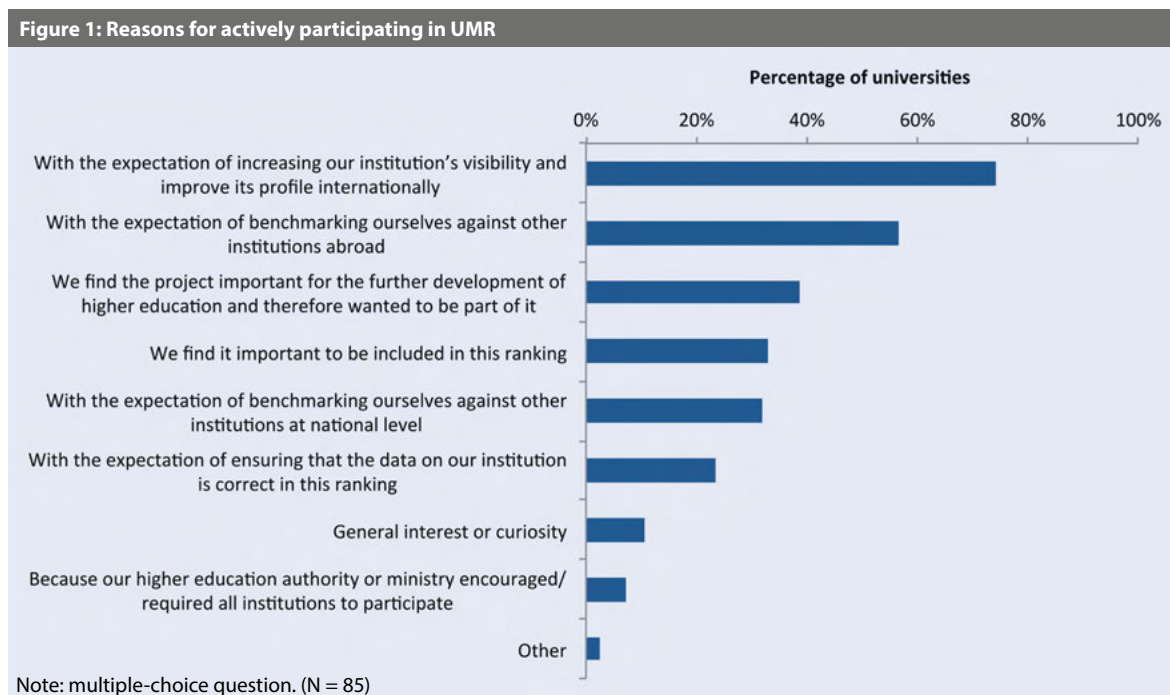
The survey among individual EUA members to map the experiences and views on U-Multirank was open from early September to the end of October 2014. The questionnaire sent to all members was adjusted depending on each university's involvement in UMR: that is, whether the university (i) actively provided data to UMR, (ii) was included in UMR through publicly available data or (iii) did not appear in UMR at all.

Altogether 126 EUA members responded to the survey: 85 had taken part actively in UMR; 7 were included through publicly available data; 34 were not included in UMR.

### EUA members actively participating in UMR

The 85 universities that took part actively in UMR and responded to the survey came from 26 countries: the top three countries were Italy and Germany, both with 9 responses, and Spain with 8 responses. These 85 universities represent 29.7% of EUA members that actively participated in UMR.

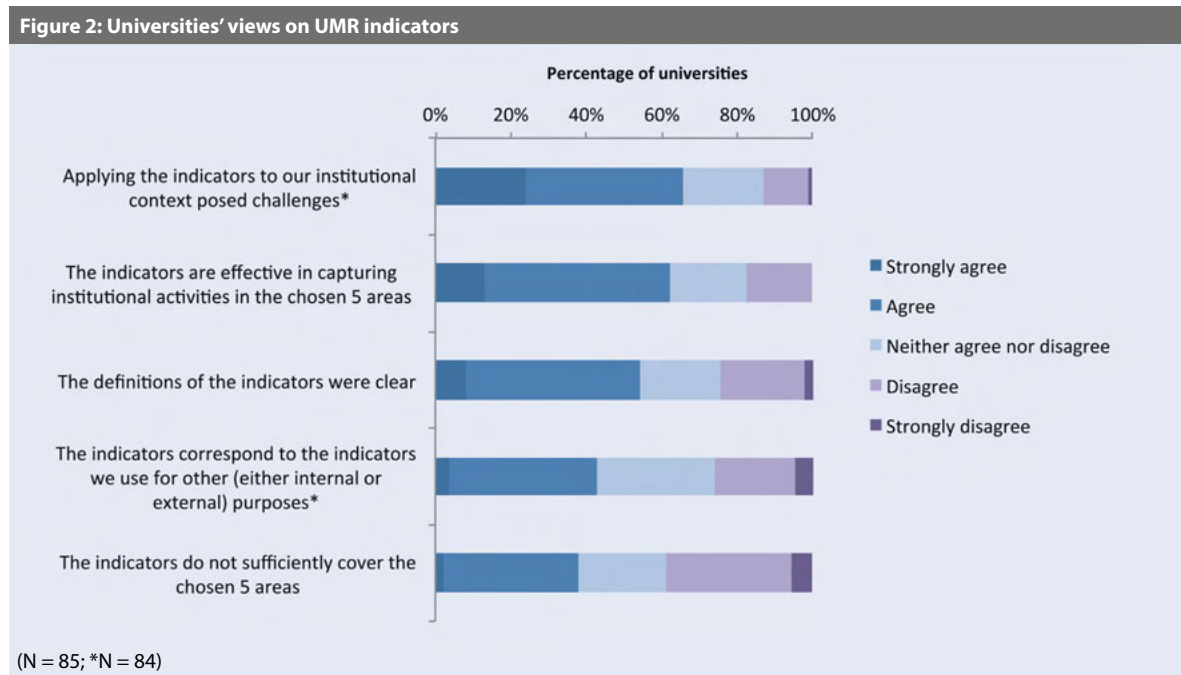
More than seven in ten of these universities indicated that increasing their visibility and improving their profile abroad was the main motivation for participating in UMR. Over half of the universities in the sample also saw participation in UMR as an opportunity to benchmark the institution at an international level (Figure 1). These responses are in line with another recent EUA study, which showed that the main reasons universities use rankings are to fill an information gap about other universities, benchmark with other universities, in particular internationally, inform institutional decision-making and – last but not least – for marketing purposes (EUA 2014, pp. 47-48).



*"(...) we feel that there is a need for a balanced assessment of universities in terms of different activities (education, research, innovation etc.) which e.g. QS and THE cannot give. U-Multirank has the potential to fill this need."* (University from Sweden)

*"The benefits of U-Multirank over other more traditional rankings are that it is a multidimensional, transparent and more user-friendly tool."* (University from Norway)





Regarding the indicators used by UMR, more than 60% of universities agreed that applying them to their own institutional context was challenging but they also perceived the same indicators to be effective in capturing institutional activities (Figure 2).

Regarding the clarity of the indicators, universities' views were not so consensual: about 54% of universities considered the definitions of the indicators to be clear, but about one in every four institutions (24.4%) did not. Less than half (42.9%) reported that the UMR indicators were similar to those they already used, albeit for other purposes (Figure 2).

Therefore, it is not surprising that 73% of universities agreed that taking part in UMR required more time and effort than they had anticipated (Figure 3). In fact, the amount of resources and time the universities reported to have devoted to the exercise are quite considerable: only 10 institutions reported that they had less than five persons involved in collecting data for UMR, while half of the universities involved 5-15 persons (Table 3). Over one-quarter (29.2%) reported having used more than 30 working days to put the data together whereas one-fifth spent less than 10 days (Table 4). The main challenges faced by those that spent more than 30 days working on the data appear to have been applying the indicators to their own institutional context and the fact that the indicators requested did not correspond to their own internal ones.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly these universities were also less likely to think that the data provided were accurately presented in the final results of UMR (41.7% vs. 58.4% in the overall sample).

*“Data Collection is a heavy burden. Data for many indicators are not available in our regular reports. We have doubts about the consistency of data (...)”* (University from Hungary)

*“The field data collection process is very time consuming. There were some difficulties in interpreting some definitions and to adjust them to the national context.”* (University from Portugal)

<sup>3</sup> The universities that reported spending more time collecting data for UMR, agreed to a stronger extent than the overall sample (78.6% vs. 65.5%) with the notion that applying the indicators to the institutional context posed challenges. Regarding the correspondence of the UMR indicators with the ones used by the institutions, the universities spending more time collecting data reported much less equivalence between the UMR and their own indicators: whereas 42.9% of the whole sample agreed that the UMR indicators corresponded to the ones used by the institution, only 33.4% of the universities spending 30 or more days collecting data for UMR shared that opinion.

**Table 3: Number of persons involved in data collection**

Number of individuals in the institution involved in data collection for UMR	Count (n)	Percentage
< 5	10	12.0%
5 – 10	23	27.7%
10 – 15	23	27.7%
15 – 20	10	12.0%
20 – 25	10	12.0%
≥ 25	7	8.4%

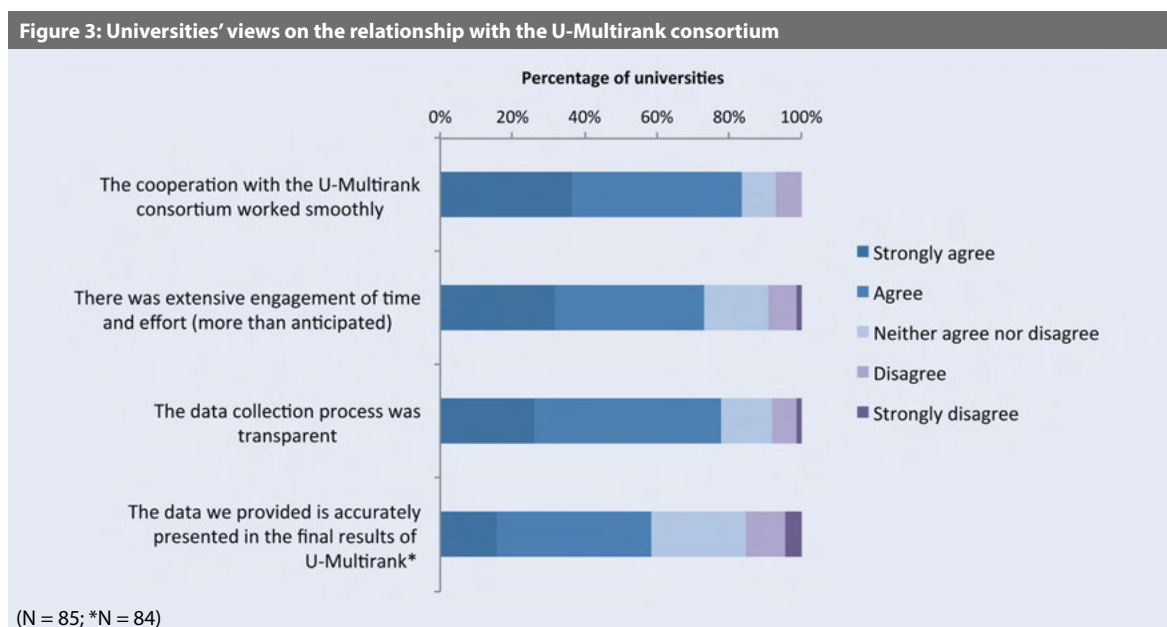
N = 83

**Table 4: Time spent in collecting data**

Time spent (days) in collecting data for UMR	Count (n)	Percentage
< 10	17	20.7%
10 – 20	31	37.8%
20 – 30	10	12.2%
30 – 40	11	13.4%
40 – 50	7	8.5%
≥ 50	6	7.3%

N = 82

However, cooperation with the UMR consortium was on the whole perceived as positive, with more than 80% of universities saying it worked smoothly and 77.7% of institutions indicating that the process was transparent (Figure 3).



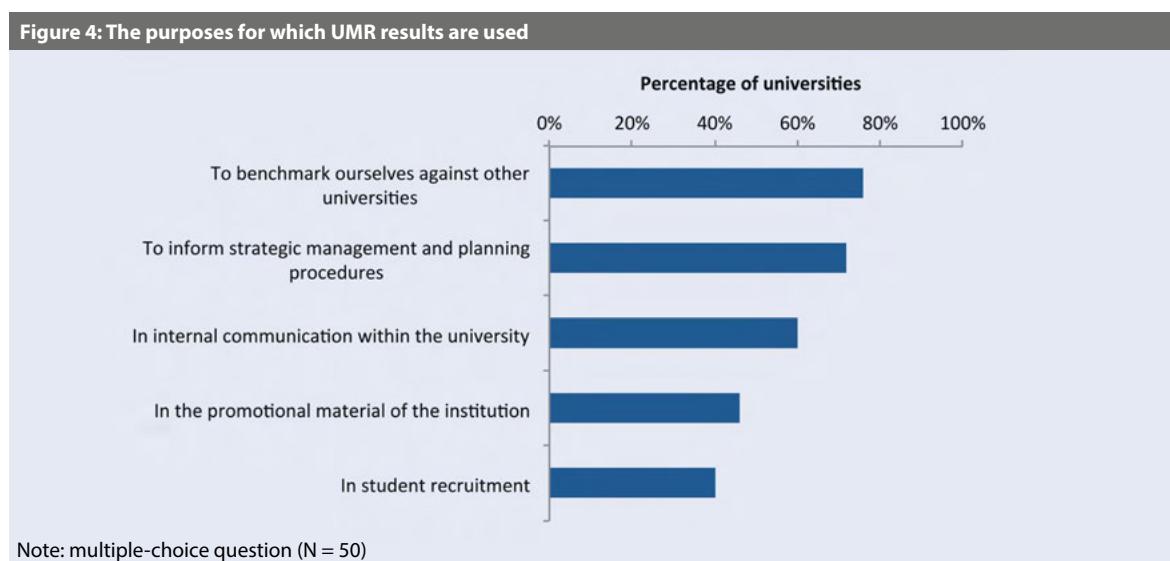
With regard to the final outcome, 58.4% of institutions considered that the data provided were accurately presented in UMR, but about one quarter of institutions did not provide a positive or a negative opinion on this matter, opting for neither agree nor disagree (Figure 3).

About six in ten universities reported using or planning to use the results of UMR and almost 30% said they had not made a decision on this issue yet (Table 5).

**Table 5: Universities' use of U-Multirank results**

Use of U-Multirank results	Count (n)	Percentage
We do not use or are not planning to use the results for anything specific	9	10.7%
We do not know yet	25	29.8%
We are already using or planning to use the results	50	59.5%

Among those universities already using or planning to use the results of UMR, the vast majority reported using the outcomes for benchmarking activities, as an input to strategic management and planning procedures and in internal and external communication (Figure 4).



Additional comments provided by the universities highlighted the challenge of providing adequate data due to differences in the data requested by UMR and the data collected and available at the university-level (e.g. different unit-level measures, complex definitions, data-protection, inadequacy of the UMR indicators to the institutional or national context, translation issues with the UMR questionnaire). Along the same lines, concerns were also expressed about the comparability between institutions and higher education systems and reliability of the data.

*“Some main indicators do not correspond with the internal logics of national university systems or show major methodical weaknesses (e.g. graduation rate does not take into account international semesters).”* (University from Germany)

*“The process of collecting data for the survey was too long. Some data was difficult to generate (i.e. division of funds spent for science transfer of knowledge, etc.). A lot of data in the survey could only be estimated. (...) Data collection and reporting at the university level is not [in line with] Multirank expectations.”* (University from Poland)

Interestingly these concerns echo the results of a recent EUA study on the impact of rankings (EUA 2014). That study concluded by asking whether efforts should be made to find consensus on an international dataset on higher education so as to facilitate international comparability. The study, *Rankings in Institutional Strategies and Processes* (RISP), found that most institutions claimed that many of the indicators used by rankings are also used by the institutions in their internal monitoring of activities (EUA 2014, p. 42).

This UMR survey confirms and further elaborates the prevailing problem: while the same indicator may be used (for examples, the number of students or staff), the definitions vary from one system or even one institution to another. How does one define a student? Who is a staff member? Are we counting people or full-time equivalents? These are some very simple examples of the questions that arise and will lead to additional work if the definitions vary. In addition, UMR uses some indicators, for which many of the universities simply do not seem to have data available, such as employability of graduates.

Finally, despite the concerns expressed, more than 85% of universities indicated their intention to continue their participation in the next rounds of UMR. Only five universities (5.9%) reported that they had decided not to participate in the next round of UMR. The rest of the universities had not made up their minds about the future at the time of the survey.

## EUA members included in UMR through publicly available data

The sample of those included in UMR through public data is very small: seven respondents from five countries. This constitutes only 8.4% of those who received the questionnaire and therefore no proper conclusions can be drawn based on the sample.

However, for the sake of completeness, the following observations can be made:

- The most frequently cited reasons for not having provided data to UMR were to see how the project would develop over time before deciding whether to take part, as well as not perceiving any benefit for the institution in contributing data. Three universities provided some further comments regarding their decision not to contribute data to UMR. These comments mainly reflected concerns about the interpretation of UMR data across different institutions and countries, the validity of the data provided and the adequacy of the indicators in relation to the institutional context.

*"We cannot see how U-Multirank can overcome the differences in how data is interpreted among universities and between countries."* (University from Sweden)

*"We had concerns about the validity of the exercise, the cost of data collection and the difficulty of quality assurance for this self-reported data."* (University from United Kingdom)

- In retrospect most universities considered their decision not to provide data to UMR to be the right one, but their responses as to whether the UMR results accurately reflected the institution were inconclusive: some universities expressed a neutral opinion (neither agree nor disagree) and the rest were somewhat split in their level of agreement.
- Out of the seven universities included in this sample, five indicated they were still not planning to contribute data actively in the next round of UMR, whereas two indicated their intention of doing so. The main reasons identified by the universities that are not planning to join the next round of UMR were related to lack of resources and to the characteristics of the UMR exercise (e.g. concerns with validity, quality of the data collected).

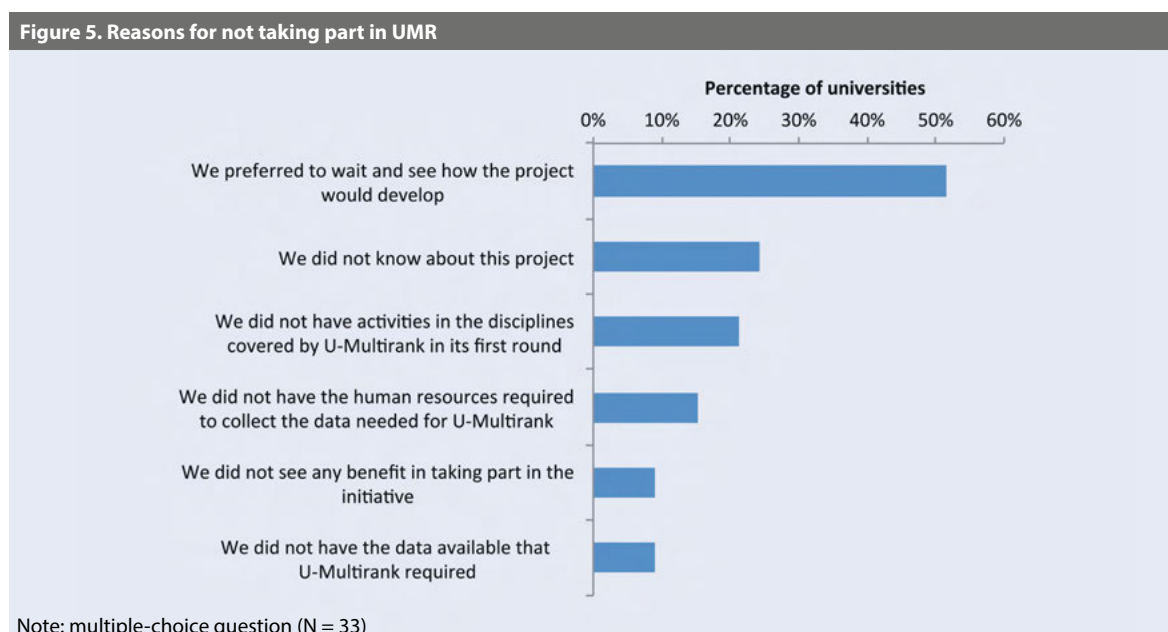
*"The U-Multirank requires too many data and it is not clear whether the institutions will provide these data in a coherent and comparable way (...) We still don't have the human resources required to collect the data needed for U-Multirank. We'll try to take part in the third round."* (University from Switzerland)

- Four universities out of the seven reported no intention of using the results of UMR.

## EUA members not included in UMR

Of the universities that were not included in UMR, questionnaire responses were received from 34 EUA members in 19 countries. The response rate, 8.21%, is therefore at the same level as those included in UMR through public data. However, due to a larger sample, it is worth exploring the results.

When asked for a reason for not taking part in UMR, about half of the respondents indicated they preferred to wait and see how UMR would develop in the future before committing to take part in this initiative. In addition, almost one-quarter of the sample (24.2%) indicated not having any knowledge about UMR and about 21% of universities indicated not having activities in the disciplines covered in the first round of UMR (Figure 5).



Interestingly, the vast majority of universities expressed their intention to contribute data in the next round of UMR (26 universities, 76.5%). The main reasons identified by these universities focused on three aspects, which are very similar to those mentioned by universities that already took part in the first round of UMR:

- Using UMR to benchmark their university against other universities and to gain more visibility (e.g. attracting students, researchers, etc.);
- Using the results of UMR internally to reflect on the position of the university and as an opportunity to improve the institution's internal procedures;
- Perceiving the UMR exercise as a relevant and/or prestigious ranking that brings benefits to the participating universities.

*"Main reason is that we think that being included in the Multirank would make our strengths visible to other institutions and specially to the student community." (University from Spain)*

*"It makes sense for our own internal governance." (University from Belgium)*

*"We firmly believe that it is a very interesting and prestigious high international impact ranking." (University from Spain)*

Conversely, 23.5% of universities (8) indicated they were not planning to contribute data to the next round of UMR. The most frequent reason was related to the resources needed to collect the data and to the fact that the benefits of participating in UMR may not always outweigh the costs (in resources) involved.

*"We are involved in several ranking activities, which all require lots of resources for collecting and preparing the required data. And several of these initiatives are (from our point of view) not satisfactory, either regarding the organisation (e.g. contact persons and interactions with the ranking agency) or the methodology and indexes used for the ranking. So there's a little bit of "uncertainty" going around and we would like to see some more experience with the new model." (University from Austria)*

## Key findings

The main issues raised by the responses to the survey can be summarised as follows:

- About one-third of EUA members contributed actively to the first round of UMR. However, many others are clearly waiting to see how the initiative develops and are considering joining in the future.
- Whether a university took part in UMR or not, all expressed major concerns regarding the interpretation of the UMR indicators across different institutions and countries and thus the validity of the data provided. This concern is backed up by the response from those actively providing data about challenges in collecting the data in the format requested.
- Collecting data for UMR required considerable resources and the amount of work surprised many of those providing data for UMR. The adequacy of the indicators in different institutional contexts was a concern.
- Cooperation with the UMR consortium worked smoothly although a small minority was not happy with the way their data was presented in the final results.
- The benefits of participation for an individual university are still rather unclear: four in 10 universities have no plans to use the results of UMR or do not yet know how they would do so.

## Conclusion

The survey results confirm that opinions regarding UMR remain divided among EUA members. They also reflect some findings of the RISP study on the impact of rankings on institutional strategies and processes (EUA 2014): the approaches on how to use rankings for the benefit of universities are not very systematic or carefully considered; developing institutional research capacity so as to be able to respond swiftly and efficiently to requests for data is vital and; there is a need to discuss whether an international common dataset on higher education would be possible in order to overcome the challenges in applying the indicators used for various purposes.

Furthermore, the survey showed that UMR is still struggling with many of the same challenges as other rankings with regards to the comparability and reliability of data. Also, many of its indicators, in particular those related to teaching and learning are rather remote proxies to quality or performance (EUA 2013). It will be interesting to see how UMR will attempt to address and overcome these challenges in the future.

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