The Academic Arms Race:
International Rankings and Global Competition
for World-Class Universities

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Introduction

The pursuit of the label ‘world-class’ university is spreading across the globe. Internationally, nationally and organizationally, excellence in international higher education has become a matter of policy that affects diverse interests. International rankings form an important input and stimulation in this positional competition for ‘world-class’ status in times of global educational expansion and global inter-connectedness of higher education (Enders 2004). The paper analyses the processes by which the field of international higher education changes due to the influence of rankings providing input into the construction of global competition for the ‘world-class university’.

In order to explore the functioning of rankings and their impact on political and organizational responses, the paper draws on institutional field theories (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Fligstein and McAdam 2012). Field theories depict universities as organizations existing with other organizations, “key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services and products” (DiMaggio and Powell 1983: 65) within a common institutional framework. The field is held together by regulation, cognitive belief systems, and normative rules, and provides social structures that have attained

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a certain degree of resilience, providing stability and meaning to social life (Scott 1995; Jepperson 1991). The institutional field perspective also provides a relational approach in understanding organizations within a field as being imbedded in complex relations of power and in hierarchical positions competing for legitimacy and resources (Naidoo 2004).

While the early neo-institutional literature has tended to depict organizational fields and their members as passive recipients of institutional frameworks and emphasized organizational continuity, notions of embedded agency (Battilana and D’Aunno 2009) and socially skilled actors (Fligstein 1997) allow to capture a more dynamic field perspective (see also Sewell, 1992). From this perspective, the emergence of international rankings can be seen as the entry of a new actor into the field providing input for field change (Sauder 2008) by constructing globally defined standards for success and failure in international higher education.

By favouring a certain institutional logic established within the heterogeneous field of higher education – research reputation – international rankings subordinate competing field logics providing new tools for constructing legitimacy and positional advantage within the field. Rankings do institutional work in the globalisation of higher education by constructing a sub-field of ‘world-class universities’ and take part in distributing the symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1988) within the field. If they are powerful enough, rankings contribute to the establishment of belonging and distinction, and set rules and criteria for those who are or want to be member of the club. Value statements of better and worse and of climbing or falling provide important signals to the universities and other actors within field, for example policy-makers who want to know where their best universities are and where improvement is needed to compete organizationally and nationally within the international field. Rankings affect the political dynamics within the field and stimulate investments according to the rules of the ranking game as everyone strives to improve their competitive positions. In this very sense, rankings
provide rhetorical devices (Wedlin 2011) with potentially important material consequences - some of which get enacted as self-fulfilling prophecies.

In this view, rankings are key elements in (trans)national governance; they provide an arena for contestation between actors; about what the appropriate criteria for comparison, success and legitimacy are; they contribute to determining organizational standards and help to define the legitimate players in the field.

In the following, the paper discusses how international rankings are socially constructed, and provide means for creating social order in the bewildering world of modern international mass higher education as well as an arena for contestation about constructing new boundaries, and defining a heartland and a periphery. How these boundaries are constructed is to a large extent dictated by the international reputational hierarchies that already prevail, biased towards research reputation. This framework is further used for investigating a growing number of governmental policies and organizational strategies that buy into the ranking game. Potentially detrimental effects of the ranking explosion are discussed, i.e. financial costs in a zero sum game, organizational isomorphism, and the reduction of diversity in higher education dominated by international ranking standards. The conclusion discusses the role of international rankings for field dynamics and provides a sketch of a forward looking research agenda for the study of rankings in the multi-level and multi-actor dynamics of international higher education.

**Setting the standards: The construction of international ranking and its implications**

Following the example of the US News ranking, a growing number of commercial media and research institutions have begun to release rankings nationally as well as worldwide. In their overview of these rankings, Usher and Medow (2009) reported that at the time of their study, there were a minimum of 26 rankings worldwide. International rankings include the
Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) by Shanghai Jiao Tong University, the Times Higher Education ranking, the QS World University ranking (the latter two split up from the Times Higher Education Supplement-QS World University ranking), the Leiden University ranking, and the Taiwan Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council ranking.

What international rankings do and communicate can be exemplified by the ARWU and the Times ranking, currently the two most influential international rankings.

The ARWU ranking was first published in June 2003 by the Center for World-Class Universities and the Institute of Higher Education of Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China, and then updated on an annual basis. ARWU never intended to provide a holistic ranking of universities around the world but was initiated to benchmark the research performance of Chinese universities and to provide tools for Chinese policy-making to boast the country’s position in the global competition for research excellence. Initially, the global success story of the ranking came as a surprise for its initiators. ARWU uses six indicators to rank world universities: the number of alumni and staff winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals, the number of highly cited researchers selected by Thomson Scientific, the number of articles published in the journals Nature and Science, the number of articles indexed in the Science Citation Index - Expanded and Social Sciences Citation Index, and per capita performance with respect to the size of an institution. The university ranking is based on the weighted sum of scores on these indicators in which Nobel prizes and per capita performance count for 10% each and the other four indicators for 20% each. More than 1000 universities are ranked by ARWU every year and the best 500 are published on the web aggregating their performance in the different fields of research and providing a ranking position to each university as well as its scores. For instance, in 2009, Cambridge ranked as number 4 and MIT as number 5 with 0.7 percentage points difference in their scores, while the difference between the 5th and 6th
(Caltech) ranked universities was 4.7 per cent. In the ARWU larger universities as measured by the number of academics or by a higher academic staff to student ratios perform better; and so do universities in countries with a larger population, more public expenditure on education and research, and English-language countries. Except for the language, these variables are indicators of better resources at either the organizational or the national level. The most recent ARWU ranking of the Top-100 universities is clearly dominated by the U.S. (n=53 universities), followed by the UK (n=9), Australia (n= 5), Germany and Japan (n=4), France, Sweden and Switzerland (n=3).

The *Times* ranking aspires to provide a holistic ranking of the world’s universities, and advertises itself as “the world leading formula” (“World University Rankings,” 20012/13) to judge world class universities across all of their core missions - teaching, research, knowledge transfer and international outlook. Times uses 13 indicators grouped into five areas: research (volume, income and reputation, weighted as 30% of the total score), citations (30%), teaching (the learning environment, 30%), international outlook (staff, students and research, 7.5%), and industry income (2.5%). Like in the ARWU, larger universities, universities and countries with better resources, and English-language countries perform better. While the Times claims to make a holistic ranking, its indicators and their weighting imply a dominant role of research output (publications, citations) and research reputation (actually measured twice: by a survey of a university’s perceived research excellence, and a survey of prestige in both research and teaching, curiously used as a teaching quality indicator). In consequence, the most recent Times ranking of the Top-100 universities is – like the recent ARWU ranking - clearly dominated by the U.S. (n=46 universities), followed by the UK (n=10), Australia, Canada and the Netherlands (= 5), France and Germany (n=4). Differences in methodology do, however, matter since we find eight universities in the Times Top-100 from Asian countries (China, Hong Kong, Korea, and Singapore) not included in the ARWU Top-100.
The current measures and representations of these rankings are the outcome of an on-going and sometimes heated methodological debate (van Raan 2007; Harvey 2008) that concerns a whole range of issues: the validity and reliability of their indicators (e.g. the strong reliance on publication and citation data dominated by the (bio-medical) sciences), the weighting of indicators (being subjective and arbitrary), the use of reputational data from perception surveys (reputation and performance are correlated but by no means identical), the ordering of universities in ranks (that overemphasize small, insignificant differences among universities), or the effect of changes in indicators and formula for ranking positions. Each year, considerable amounts of resources are actually spent and a considerable number of experts get consulted to improve the rankings and to boost their legitimacy. In 2010, the Times Higher Education has, for example, undertaken a major overhaul of its ranking methodology. The challenge of producing the ‘best’ and most popular international ranking of universities is indeed a competitive race in its own right.

Such important methodological debate overshadows, however, the fact that it is the simplistic beauty of rankings and the hidden work of constructing world-class universities at a global level that empowers them so that “they travel widely and are easily inserted into new places and for new uses” (Espeland and Sauder 2007: 36). Rankings do Aristotelian science as Focault (1971) has analysed it: Things get classified, sorted into different categories and vertically ordered. This process makes it easier to access and process information, and simplification often makes information seem more authoritative. Lists are reassuring and simple sound bites of information have their own beauty. March and Simon (1958) have shown how such processes of simplification obscure the discretion, assumptions, and arbitrariness that unavoidably infuse information. Consequently, uncertainty and contingency get absorbed. Paradoxically, information appears more robust and definitive than it would if presented in more complicated forms.
Rankings construct their object of comparison – the university - and make this object comparable introducing the idea that potentially all universities around the world belong to the same class of objects. Differences in contexts, conditions and missions of universities get suppressed leading to their de-contextualization within the rankings. Rankings turn qualities into quantities within a metric that allows producing a hierarchy of universities with a simple and clear rank order. Differences between universities thus become a matter of better or worth within a pre-defined space of performance, a value statement that excludes non-hierarchical alternatives. Qualities that cannot be expressed in quantities disappear, are marginalized and become de-valued. What is not countable does not count. Rankings produce what they measure: an imagined world-class university that can be calculated according to standardized norms of excellence.

This process of social construction inherent to international rankings, in our case rankings exclusively or dominantly based on research performance, has several implications.

A first critical significance of rankings is the fact that they are produced and communicated by new actors, organizations that emerge external to the field while providing an input into the struggle for competitive advantage within the field (Sauder 2008). Certainly, the scientific field has always been the locus of a competitive struggle for positional advantage in which the issue at stake is scientific authority and related symbolic (reputational) capital. Peers have observed each other’s work and have made judgments about each other’s products and performance via more formalized processes (e.g. in peer-review-based decisions about publications or funding) as well as via informal processes (e.g. citations, invitations, informal talk). Such processes traditionally unfolded within largely autonomous and closed scientific fields following a specific professional logic where “producers tend to have no possible clients other than their competitors . . . a particular producer cannot expect recognition of the value of his products . . . from anyone except other producers” (Bourdieu 1975: 23). The
construction of excellence in international rankings builds on judgments that have traditionally been acts within scientific fields based on tacit understandings and informal communication. Ranking organizations use such value statements provided by scientific communities (e.g. in reputational surveys), constructs of scientific authority produced within scientific communities while provided by commercial organizations (e.g. publication and citation data banks), or data provided by universities (e.g. numbers of staff and students). Rankings can rely on this field-specific logic as a resource of legitimacy and power. Resistance against the basic logic of international rankings from within the field is hard to organize since they ‘borrow’ their authority from a powerful professional logic of the scientific field itself. Critique of rankings from within the field rather concerns issues of methodology as well as of their political use by other actors and audiences.

They follow, however, their own logic and assumptions in gathering, weighting, aggregating and communicating their calculative representations of universities. In doing so, rankings are challenging the informal field logic by making status hierarchies publicly widely visible, easily understandable, and usable for a variety of actors, last but not least policy-makers and organizational management. Rankings introduce new actors to an established field and do eventually powerful institutional work by transforming the relationships and powers among field members as well as by providing audiences external to the field of producers with ‘information’ that can be used to assess the field and demand field change (Sauder 2008).

Second, and related to the first point, the most influential international rankings are either exclusively or dominantly based on indicators reflecting research-related reputation as a perceptual construct and/or of performance output measures constructed by scientific communities. International rankings select and favour a specific logic – research excellence - within the field over others. The uses of the field of higher education are manifold resulting from the particular combination of scientific and educational, social and economic, cultural
and ideological roles. Higher education contributes to the production and application of scientific knowledge, the social development and educational upgrading of societies, the selection and formation of elites, and the generation and transmission of ideology. This range constitutes the key tasks of higher education, albeit with different emphases depending on the historical period, the national context, and indeed the type of university concerned. Like many other fields, higher education is thus characterized by a constant struggle between different and eventually competing institutional logics. Rankings contribute to this struggle by favouring the logic of cutting edge scientific knowledge production over other logics.

They also favour research in certain disciplines over others and contribute as well to the reputational struggle between different disciplinary and inter-disciplinary communities within the scientific field. Publication and citation cultures and norms vary considerably across academic fields, and rankings rely on bibliometric counts that favour a certain publication culture developed in the hard sciences, over-representing the bio and medical sciences while under-representing publication cultures not dominated by English-language international peer reviewed journal articles. Because of the growing influence of rankings on political and organizational choices, decision-makers are likely to weight some disciplines more heavily than others when allocating resources. Pressure will also grow in all fields of research to comply with ranking-relevant standards of publication leading to a colonization of other fields of research by the publication culture of the sciences.

Third, one of the side-effects of rankings has been that the university as an organization is becoming an object as well as a subject in the on-going construction of excellence. Universities have to some extent always been concerned with the construction and preservation of reputation. Yet, such reputation-focused activities have traditionally been played out via individual academics and academic units, and the reputation they lend to their organization. Public-sector reforms inspired by New Public Management principles have
evolved around the globe that already stressed the strategic actorhood of the university as an organization; changing and increasing managerial spaces within universities; and the evaluation and benchmarking of universities as a whole (Krücken and Meier 2006; de Boer et al. 2007). The responsibility and accountability of universities has expanded beyond traditional bureaucratic areas of control, and the university as an organization becomes a focus and locus of governance within the field. The rise of international rankings has further accelerated the discourse of universities as corporate and global actors. Once reputation gets calculated and made visible in a simplistic measure of ‘university performance’, and comparisons with other organizations around the globe can supposedly easily be made, reputation is being shifted from the level of individual scholars to an organizational issue to be dealt with by responsive management (Power et al. 2009).

In consequence of ranking criteria, we can further note how a certain type of world-class university serves as a role model for the ranking criteria and consequently their outcomes. Global comparisons are made most prominently in relation to one model of universities, the comprehensive research-intensive university. This university model, most prominently developed in the leading U.S. American research universities, lends itself to the formation of a single global competition constructed in the rankings that build on established notions of what constitutes a ‘world-class university’ (Marginson and van der Wende 2007). The success of American universities in these rankings and their current domination in the emerging global field is the consequent outcome of the social construction of ‘world-class’ in doing rankings. Other models of universities that would, for example, focus on undergraduate teaching, regional development, or certain fields of research only can by definition not successfully compete in the beauty contest organized by the rankings. By prioritizing and favouring a certain university model, rankings set standards for inclusion and exclusion and provide role models of legitimate and successful ways of organizing universities as organizations
according to their standards. They also re-enforce a trend in scientific knowledge production that already developed before international university rankings came into existence: the rising collaboration in high-impact science across university boundaries in which world-class research universities play a leading role. Recent scientometric research documents that multi-university authored papers are the fastest growing type of publications, increasingly stratified by university rank, and more likely to become highest-impact papers when the collaboration includes a top-ranked university. “Thus, although geographic distance is of decreasing importance, social distance is of increasing importance in research collaborations” (Johns et al. 2008: 1261).

Fourth, rankings implicitly support the idea of organizational vertical stratification as a standard for success in the field of higher education. In some countries, e.g. France, Japan, the UK, U.S., vertical stratification and related status hierarchies among their universities developed long before national and international rankings entered the field. Such patterns of national stratification could, however, reflect different roles of universities within specific contexts and conditions: universities’ scientific role showing the leading research universities at the top, the role of prestigious teaching-oriented organizations for the social reproduction of societal elite, or a mix of both functions. In many countries, vertical stratification played, however, a minor or less visible role, and universities traditionally enjoyed broad parity of status, and of regulatory and financial treatment. Nowadays, vertical stratification has become an issue also in these systems where there is a marked shift to engage with global league tables.

Finally, international rankings do what national rankings do but they do it on a global scale providing measures that can easily be aggregated to point at success and failure, rise and fall of countries in the emerging field-specific global competition. Certainly, comparing countries’ success in rankings is problematic in many ways. Rankings ignore national and
organizational contexts and conditions, most importantly regulatory regimes and availability of funding. They ignore the size of a country and of its higher education system, or the dominance of English as the language of science that works in the favour of few countries that also dominate the landscape of international journals. The simplistic beauty of rankings; their standardized, de-contextualized, commensurate measures unfold, however, not only seductive and coercive power for inter-organizational competition but for inter-national competition as well, including a new space for transnational governance.

**Playing the ranking game: Policy initiatives and organizational responses**

With international rankings, especially the global ranking of research performance, the field of higher education has entered a truly global space for the exertion of transnational governance, of global competition between countries and between universities as global actors in their own right. Higher education systems that were once protected, as closed national preserves, are now ‘open’ systems exposed to global reputational competition. The rankings quickly achieved great attention in higher education, in international and national politics and public arenas, and influence transnational governance, national and organizational policy behaviour.

Organizations at the transnational or supranational level have been quick to interact with international rankings in various ways. Rankings themselves have become an issue of transnational governance. In 2004, for example, UNESCO and the US-based Institute for Higher Education Policy initiated a process for self-regulation and self-monitoring of rankings. The creation of an international expert group led in a first step to a code of conduct and good practice for the ranking business (the Berlin principles) and subsequently to the establishment of an Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence that is aiming at a system to audit the auditors. This process will, however, only gain credibility if it is used by
the majority of the main ranking compilers and if it can show some independence from these. In 2008, the European Commission took its initiative to create a new ‘European’ ranking that would pay more attention and respect for the diversity in the field of higher education, and is expected to counter-balance rankings being dominated by the Anglo-Saxon and Asian ranking organizations. The resulting U-Multirank project is now being conducted by a consortium of European research centres whose basic approach is to compare only institutions which are similar and comparable in terms of their missions and structures (van Vught and Ziegele 2012). Field-based rankings will focus on a particular type of institution, and develop and test sets of indicators appropriate to these institutions by using a grouping approach rather than a league table approach. The design will compare not only the research performance of institutions but will include teaching and learning as well as other aspects of university performance. This indicates a rather self-reinforcing process of ranking expansion and proliferation where the development and use of rankings and their measures to alter perceptions of the field is likely to spur the need for new and better measures and systems, in search of the most appropriate and authoritative ranking.

Transnational organizations, such as the European Commission, the OECD, UNESCO, or the World Bank have also been buying into the competitive logic of international rankings. In recent years, the field of higher education and research has been re-discovered as a major driver of innovation for national, regional and global economic growth. A new grand narrative of the role of the field of higher education has emerged. As universities are increasingly seen as important parts of innovation systems, they are prioritized as a core institution for the global competitiveness of the knowledge-based economy and therefore a key strategic area for transnational and national policy. This goes together with the emergence of a set of generic higher education and research policies, and a competitive turn in the transnational governance of the field. Transnational and supranational organizations have themselves
discovered the potentially powerful and coercive logic of stocktaking, benchmarking and reporting on world regions and countries according to their standards and policy templates (Enders and Westerheijden 2011). Policy scoreboards, record cards and the like provide synthetic, easily-readable, and widely-distributed overviews of what has been achieved and not achieved in countries. Naming, blaming, and shaming of countries can impose enormous pressure on national policy-makers even though they are formally speaking participating in an unbinding international political processes based on voluntary agreement. This competitive turn in the political management of the transnational governance of higher education co-evolved with the rise of international rankings that have quickly been picked up by international organizations. Policies for building world-class universities or excellence in higher education have indeed been advocated as internationally applicable instruments for better regulation and system design by the EU, the OECD, UNESCO and the World Bank (European Commission 2005; Godin 2003; Sadlak and Cai 2009; Salmi 2009). Next to the rankings themselves, international organizations provide a further driver for governments to implement policies to maintain or build ‘world class’ universities in their national systems (Hazelkorn 2011).

In Europe, targeted evaluation and funding for research in selected universities were first developed in the UK while nowadays processes of policy formation and implementation for world class in the field of higher education are observable in many if not all continental European countries. Vertical stratification has thus become an issue in many national systems where international pressures allow agile institutional entrepreneurs within the system to reconfigure it.

Germany’s science and higher-education system has, for example, been characterized by sectoral differentiation (universities, vocational higher education, public research organizations), while universities were considered roughly equal in terms of prestige, quality
and political ‘treatment’. International rankings undermined traditional beliefs about the high international standing of German university-based research as well as beliefs about a more or less equal performance of German universities. In 2005, the German Excellence Initiative was launched by the Federal government and the Länder to improve the international standing of German universities and to provide targeted funding on a competitive basis to selected universities to enable them to compete on a global scale. France recently developed its own approach for excellence policies that introduced major changes to the conception of the field of higher education. Like in Germany, some academics, programs or universities were more renowned than others, but governments of different political hues often declared that their main objective was to secure national equality and fight against imbalances that might occur between regions or universities. Excellence policies mark a break with this long tradition and aim at increasing differentiation among universities. Further, these policies aim at developing regional synergies and new forms of common governance among universities, selective grandes écoles and research organizations in order to weaken the traditional divide between these sectors within the field. A similar trend has been detected in ex-communist countries including Russia, China, and many Eastern European countries.

More and more Asian countries are also joining this academic arms race of further investment into national standing in the global field of higher education. For instance, China’s 211 and 985 projects, Japan’s Centre of Excellence in the 21st Century programme, Taiwan’s ‘five-year–fifty-billion’ programme and South Korea’s Brain Korea 21 are political initiatives in these countries to improve the research capacity of selected institutions or research units, thereby facilitating them to compete for world-class status. In Latin America, countries like Argentina, Brazil and Chile are sending their selected universities into the competition; and Arab Gulf states have also announced their aspirations, including the establishment of new research universities such as in Saudi Arabia.
In sum, we are witnessing a veritable process of international policy diffusion in global higher education. The international pressures allow agile institutional entrepreneurs within the national system to reconfigure it, potentially consolidating their own national positions of advantage and inhibiting challenge. Deliberate stratification of universities by the State can be understood in relation to such strategies of exclusion. And national academic elites are suspect of being quick in welcoming the plans for designating research-intensive universities. Social networking among these elites and with political actors then might play as much of a part in the selection of a privileged core as any more objective indicators of academic outputs.

According to neo-institutionalist perspectives, there are well known isomorphic drivers to explain the diffusion of the world-class university narrative over time and across national contexts (Meyer et al. 1997). Changes in beliefs about the appropriate ways of running modern and efficient higher education and research systems lead to isomorphic pressures to engage with policies for world-class. Such policies are an example of the social construction of appropriate goals, means and ends. Policy choice is based on fads, revered exemplars, or abstract templates, and social acceptance of the policy approach might happen in different ways: a) leading countries serve as exemplars; b) international organizations serve as model-builders and norm-setters; c) expert groups theorize the effects of a new policy, and thereby give policy makers rationales for adopting it.

The work of Espeland and Sauder (2009) has shown that universities have little chance to escape from this academic arms race. Buffering universities from rankings is difficult if not impossible – depending on the regulatory environment and the position of the university – while governmental policies add to the pressures unfolded by the international rankings. International rankings and national policies for ‘world-class’ play out in the very heartland of the academic system – the struggle for reputation as a symbolic capital, and related benefits in economic and social capital.
Rankings, reputation management and branding have in fact a mutually re-enforcing effect. Rankings provide signals to universities to engage in reputation management and branding (Naidoo and Beverland 2012). In the most general – and frequently unaddressed - sense rankings make universities think about themselves as an organization. By comparing and ranking universities as a whole they contribute to the idea that the organization matters, that strategic actorhood of universities as organizations has to be developed, that reputation management and organizational branding are needed.

In a more specific sense, rankings use indicators that invite universities to actively engage in influencing their performance according to the ranking standards as well as their image in the eyes of relevant others. Buying Nobel Prize winners provides, for example, an expensive though fast track to climb in the ARWU rankings – improvements in the ranking position will show up immediately. Merging with other (more) research-intensive universities or public laboratories provides further means to quickly gather success in publications and citations as well as the critical mass needed in the ranking game. Establishing carrots and sticks for academics to publish more in English language, international peer reviewed journals provides another popular route to success that needs, however, years to unfold. The same holds for ‘picking the winners’ and privileging the core of research active academics while creating a divide between them and the teaching active staff. Establishing graduate schools as well as tenure-track systems in the global competition for young academic talent may count twice – in terms of publication and citation production as well as internationalization. In these and other ways, rankings and their indicators which started their life external to the organization have the potential to get internalized into the very dynamics of the university and its self-management reactively aligning internal measures and policies with the indicators informing the rankings.
As regards branding, prestige surveys of rankings offering halo-susceptible opinions are most obvious examples of where universities can try to manage their perception by others. Marketing and public relations activities, assuring the use of the university’s brand in all its public appearances, increasing international alliances and global networks provide examples for tools of organizational perception management. More and more universities also use rankings to brand themselves, to market themselves by using the simplistic representation of their success in rankings. Some are even courageous enough to announce their future ambitions in climbing the rankings as part of their image projects. And success and failure of university leaders, sometimes also their salaries, might get tied to organizational success measured by ranking positions. Obviously, such practices provide additional legitimacy to the rankings. When universities put their rankings on their Websites, brochures, or press releases, they are complicit in producing and disseminating identities that align with rankings, which in turn might shape internal processes of identification. Positional competition in rankings thus partly plays out in an image game, a process that works at the edges but seems to become more edgy. In a domain of intangibles, the greater the uncertainty and ambiguity of a product the stronger the potential effect of skilfully managed activities aiming at their perception by relevant others. In consequence, it becomes a real question to what extent branding and the co-production of images in the ranking game reflects or deviates from a university’s reality; a “circcean transformation from substance to image” that Gioia and Corley (2002: 107) discussed while looking at the impact of business school rankings.

**The potential costs involved: waste, isomorphism, and neglect of diversity**

International competition and vertical stratification in higher education have become visible around the globe including a growing number of regions and countries where there is now a marked shift to engage with international rankings and related global competition.
Governments are privileging a core of universities to represent their country in this race. Universities develop strategic responses to adapt to the performance criteria and standards created by international rankings and the incentives set by their governments to engage in the global competition for ‘world-class’. Investments made in this international arms race are not necessarily wasted but there is a real challenge due to the competitive dynamics that govern such expenditures.

More and more governments are introducing market or quasi-market competition to their higher education systems and universities that are invited to participate in an international and national rivalry for ‘global talent’, students and faculty members, and resources centred on research reputation. International rankings are a most visible symptom of massification and globalization as well as a driver for the increasing trend toward competition among universities in both national systems and in the international field. The arms race is already costly and is likely to become even more costly in the future when more and more countries and universities engage in this competition. And when everybody invests very few will gain a competitive advantage, if at all. The competition continues on a higher level of performance which is likely to set incentives for further investment into the academic arms race.

Playing the ranking game may also have perverse effects on national and organizational strategies. Actions might be taken that are not aligned with public policy goals but that have the sole aim of moving up the list(s). Allotted public funds then risk being wasted as well. In discussing research on the effects of rankings in the U.S. and the UK, Dill (2009: 102) speaks of a “highly costly, zero-sum game, in which most institutions as well as society will be the losers”. The research suggests that the normative standard of rankings rather distorts the assumed link between information on academic quality and university efforts to improve academic standards. As a consequence, many universities have responded to ranking competition by investing into managing research reputation and an increasingly costly market
for research stars, shifting disciplinary priorities towards high impact fields, setting incentives for increasing research output; and by investing into marketing and branding activities that push up their perceptual standing within the field, with limited attention to actually improving academic standards. The distorting influence of this arms race unfolds because privileged world-class universities provide a financial standard for all of higher education and present spending targets for less elite universities that wish to compete. Behind such aspirations lies the spread and intensification of international higher education as a ‘winner-take-all market’ (Frank and Cook 1995) in which small differences in performance translate eventually into large differences in reward.

In addition, international rankings are likely to fuel organizational isomorphism within the global field of higher education leading universities to change their focus and mission in response to rankings. International rankings contribute to deliberate stratification by constructing new boundaries and defining a heartland and a periphery. How these boundaries are constructed is to a large extent dictated by the international reputational hierarchies that already prevail, which are centred on research reputation. While policy-makers and organizational leaders might emphasize the importance of organizational diversity, universities of different types, missions and conditions are considerably affected by the same set of ranking indicators. The world-class research university thus becomes the ultimate template for success. It becomes the Holy Grail which many universities are striving for, even if only a few of them will be successful. However, competition according to normalized ranking standards will lead to the imitation of the best and thus to a further standardization of research universities internationally. Policy-makers and organizational leaders act rationally and strategically when they try to become what is measured while what is measured becomes increasingly accepted and normalized. Paradoxically, rankings may thus contribute to the
erosion of differentiation that already exists within the field and potentially threatens to flatten out diversity among organizations.

In this context, concern for the wider purposes of higher education seems to have few effective champions. The public mission of higher education (Calhoun 2006; Enders and Jongbloed 2007) is challenged by these developments. What seems likely to happen is a loss of reputation attached to other purposes of universities than their research function. The privileging of academic research outputs leads to the consequent reduction in the diversity of organizational missions; or, at least, the subordination of those other missions to research. Issues of access and equity, the role of higher education for social mobility, the quality of teaching and learning, the contribution of a university to the community and regional development, to name but a few examples, do not play a significant role in international rankings. This risks reducing the diversity, adaptability and resilience of the higher education system as a whole; something of central concern for public policy and the governance of higher education and research.

**Conclusions and further research**

This paper has argued that the rise of international rankings in higher education forms a visible symptom of global educational expansion and global inter-connectedness in the field while rankings also provide important input into the field dynamics. The entry of international rankings into the field shows how field dynamics can change due to the emergence of new actors within the field that rationalize informal field dynamics and externalize its logic in widely visible quality judgments according to their own systems. International rankings interact with traditional field dynamics by selecting the dominant logic of research excellence as the ultimate standard for inclusion and exclusion in the competitive apex of the field neglecting other logics within the heteronomous field. They do Aristotelian science of
classification, hierarchization and de-contextualization producing ‘magical numbers’ (March 1996) in the construction of standards for the world-class-university that are easily communicable and digestible. The simplistic beauty of ranking systems supports their seductive and coercive power, makes them travel easily and lends itself to uses in multiple contexts of the international field.

International rankings do institutional work within a multi-level and multi-actor field. They affect the constant struggle for multiple and competing logics of higher education within the organizational field as well as within the political field. In this view, rankings are new key elements in the (trans)national governance of the field. They provide an arena for contestation between actors; about what the appropriate criteria for comparison, success and legitimacy are. They stimulate investments according to the rules of the ranking game as universities as well as countries strive to improve their competitive positions. By defining universities around the globe as their primary object of comparison rankings support the conception and construction of the university as a corporate and global actor, as a focus and locus of governance within the field. Reputation and reputational risk are matters that continue to concern the traditional professional logic within the field but increasingly so the emerging organizational logic of the strategic actorhood of the university as well. By making national comparisons for competitive standing easy and widely visible rankings trigger a process of regulatory competition for ‘world-class’ in higher education. The promulgation of policies for ‘world-class’ as universally applicable policy tools as well as the growing number of countries engaging with excellence policies seems to suggest processes of international diffusion and convergence. Whether brought by international organizations and epistemic communities or direct competitors, governments have little choice, the thinking goes, but to invest into the international academic arms race. The analysis shows the usefulness of such a multi-level and multi-actor perspective on field change and institutional logics within a
heteronomous global field, and in conclusion some implications for future research are outlined.

First, international rankings remind us that the diffusion of global templates for field change needs to be enacted to unfold their seductive and coercive power. ‘Globalization’ does not just happen to us but needs actors as carriers of new ideas and narratives as well as the reactivity of other actors within the field to be enacted. The line of argument presented in this paper draws attention to a line of inquiry that goes beyond overt processes of adoption and compliance, and calls for the examination of on-the-ground negotiation, implementation, and rejection. Some research has been done to investigate universities’ reactivity to rankings showing that it ‘takes two to tango’ while the field is not just populated by ranking organizations and universities. Rankings have also entered the international and national policy arena, and little is known about the dynamics of the international spread of rankings themselves as well as about the political diffusion and uptake in international organizations and national policy-making. While we gain some purchase from a neo-institutionalist perspective on ‘world polity’ and international policy diffusion, this strand of research does not pay a great deal of attention to the on-the-ground processes of their enactment and assumes rejection to be the ‘exception from the rule’ of globalization.

To date, no systematic comparative empirical research has sought to explore the factors driving and forming the rise of rankings and related policies for ‘world-class’ across countries. Such research has the potential to offer original insights into the policy dynamics and the logics of contestation and change in the heteronomous field. In order to understand the policy dynamics conceptual frameworks addressing agenda change (Baumgartner et al. 2006; Kingdon 1995) provide further conceptual inspiration and empirical tools by simultaneously following ideas and actors. Attention needs to be paid to international and national actors who are influential in framing the problems, suggesting solutions, as well as to
actors trying to block the process, denying access to new issues taking into account conflicting interests, power relations and strategic actorhood. ‘Shifts in framing’ point to the role of ideational factors for explaining policy-making trajectories and policy transformations; that is the influence of causal narratives in the conception of policies. We can assume that in a political sub-field like higher education – which has been deeply rooted in national traditions and normative beliefs - ideational factors provide an important factor for political change. The study of ideational change will also point to deeper ‘discursive turns’ in the social reconstruction of the role the field is expected to fulfil within society and economy.

Second, variety in the regulatory and normative order of higher education can be expected to mediate the reactivity of universities to rankings and stratification policies, and related field change. The political, social, and cultural contexts in which universities exist affect how they operate and how they can interact with templates for global competition. The traditional degree of vertical stratification within the national field, the autonomy in running a university, the resource dependencies of universities and their ability to acquire new funds vary depending on their legal status and reliance on public budgets. Accounting for contexts and conditions is not just of relevance for understanding strategic organizational behaviour but for our conceptualizations of institutional logics in universities as hybrid organizations and field change. In his influential study of universities’ reactivity to rankings, Sauder (2008) argues that field changes cannot be explained by change in institutional logics since the logics of vertical organizational ordering and of competition according to the logics of the marketplace have begun before the introduction of the rankings. While this holds for a highly stratified and marketized system like the one in the U.S. international rankings diffuse such logics around the globe and into very different parts of the world where such logics have traditionally not prevailed. International rankings penetrate very different national fields; what comes as a rationalization of well-established orders in one context forms a remarkable exogenous shock
in a different context. Future research thus also needs to pay systematic attention to variations in organizational responses to rankings and stratification policies, the conditions that influence the mechanism and degree of their unfolding discipline in organizations in different regulatory and normative contexts. As institutional research on organizational hybrids and related field dynamics is still relatively scarce, and understanding of organizational responses to institutional complexity and change is partial, much work remains to be done (Greenwood et al., 2011).

Third, the aggregate outcome of organizational reactivity to rankings and stratification policies lends itself to the further study of competition and stratification within the field, on the global level as well as on the national level. Under certain conditions, there is the probability that reputational and material gains generate further gains in an exponential way. Bourdieu’s theory of capital accumulation (Bourdieu 1975) as well as Merton’s Matthew effect (1968) would predict a growing inequality within the field due to self-reinforcing mechanisms. Under conditions of a zero-sum game (in terms of available material and immaterial resources) gains of some would lead consequentially to losses of others. Since status competition is characterized by closure, the membership of the elite would remain largely stable over time. Where this pattern changes, it would not be on the side of greater access but of greater closure leading to a more intensive concentration of status at the very top. This could shift to a ‘saturation effect’ which would lead to a new ‘equilibrium’ via the institutionalization of status hierarchies and a situation in which mechanisms of the reproduction of inequality become dominant. Under certain conditions, stratification might, however, ‘fail’. The field might be more or less saturated; mobilization of interest and resources might become marginal, confirm the status quo ante or lead to minor further stratification effects. Stratification might also not appear due to policy design. National and organizational resources might be insufficient, might not be concentrated enough (spreading
all over the field) or might not be sustainable (creating a very limited temporary shock within the field). Stratification might also not appear due to ‘contesting the game’: competition for ‘world-class’ in research might be accompanied or followed by actors and actions calling for political intervention to re-balance the field. Such actors can be expected to make use of the multi-functional role of universities and claim a neglect of functions other than elite science.

International rankings contribute to the competitive turn in higher education and affect diverse interests internationally, nationally, and organizationally. As such rankings proliferate and interact with other changes in the (trans)national governance of higher education, further research is needed to more fully understand and theorize the role and impact of these systems in the field of higher education.

References


