University Rankings

A Dead End

K O S T A S   G A V R O G L U

ABSTRACT   The ranking systems for universities aim at the quantification of all aspects of university life. For many decades, universities prided themselves on the differences among them. Rankings reduced discussions about the qualitative differences among universities to discussions of numerical differences. Perhaps the closest one can get to drawing a road map of the present and future of universities is understanding the form and content of the rankings within the overall framework of the digital condition. The digital condition already forces the adoption of new ethical modes, restructures working time, imposes styles of reading, affects teaching, and dictates new research practices. But above all, the rearticulations of democracy due to the digital condition will mark the new state of the universities. And such a prospect can perhaps be defined within Bill Sharpe's three horizons framework.

KEYWORDS   university rankings, neoliberalism, quantification, higher education, democracy

Thinking in the 1990s of the State of Universities in the 2020s

In discussing the state of the universities in thirty years' time, it may perhaps be useful to start with a *Gedankenexperiment* about what we would have thought if thirty years ago we held a meeting to discuss the state of the universities in our day. In fact, 1990 is a rather symbolic date, since it is the time when the phrase "Washington consensus" was coined to express in no uncertain terms the road map to a full implementation of the neoliberal agenda at every level of the economy and government.[1] Could we have understood in 1990 any of the dynamics that followed and shaped today's universities? Could we have been in a position to comprehend the decisive effects that a number of practices and policies that were in their nascent stages would have in transforming universities? More importantly, would we have been in a position to *accept* the conclusions of our analyses if they led to a totally transformed institution compared to what it had been for almost two centuries? To many academics, universities appeared as invincible and immutable institutions.

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They were considered institutions that could adopt many changes and could adapt to changing external conditions, but few believed that universities could be radically transformed as a result of these adoptions and adaptations. The dominant view among academics was that universities evolved with almost no discontinuities. However, during the last three decades, there has been a stupendous gestalt shift in the views we entertain about the development of universities, and we have come to accept that universities did indeed go through transformative discontinuities. Presently, almost everyone accepts that universities have been qualitatively transformed; despite the fact that many think this is a disastrous change, some think it is the best thing that has happened to universities, and a few are so perplexed that they oscillate between these two viewpoints.

It appears that the dominant political forces do not care anymore about whether universities should aim at educating citizens and cultivating criticality. Nevertheless, they very much care about whether postsecondary institutions are oriented toward teaching skills. The same political forces are almost obsessed with innovation. Educating the young has slowly become synonymous with teaching them skills, and knowledge production has become synonymous with innovation. But even the acquisition of skills and innovation are subordinate to an overall strategy whose aim is to undermine the relative autonomy of universities and compel them to obey the Invisible Hand. And though the various official reports of policymaking bodies of the European Union make a point to pay their respects to "education and research," their subsequent recommendations betray their true beliefs: the "old" approach has turned universities into obsolete institutions that do not serve the "needs" of society—a euphemism for implementing the neoliberal agenda.

Let us go back to our *Gedankenexperiment*. In that meeting, we would have listed a number of trends that made their presence felt rather strongly; some of these we would have considered a little worrisome, and some would have been met with enthusiasm. In 1990, then, there were strong indications that the funding of universities was being dissociated from the obligations of the state. This almost axiomatic aspect of higher education policy in Europe started to wane, and many policymakers talked of the bright futures universities would have if they sought economic independence from the governments and, hence, strengthened competition among them—with all the ensuing advantages that such competition would bring about, according to the new gurus of policymaking. The same policymakers started to air doubts about the effectiveness of the very notion of tenured staff, and this hallowed ingredient of academic life was no longer invulnerable. In conjunction with the undermining of tenure, low-paid adjunct teaching staff were present in many departments, but nothing foretold that the imposition of precarious working conditions would become the standard way for universities to meet their teaching needs. When adjuncts became almost the rule in many, especially

US, universities, their working conditions and prospects heralded the zero-hour contracts that became so prevalent after 2015. Precariousness has become the rule in a growing number of institutions of higher education. Furthermore, the administration of many US universities included a number of nonacademic staff, a tradition not often followed in European universities. During the last thirty years, "managerialism" in European universities has become the rule, academic staff have been subservient to all kinds of decisions by administrations that resemble business practices, and increasingly students have been referred to—and, more importantly, thought of—as "clients."

These were some of the emerging trends of the early 1990s, and, with hindsight, they were not given the attention they deserved or recognized as shaping the future of the universities. Again, with hindsight, we can claim that not even the critics of neoliberalism could foresee the dramatic consequences of these trends for universities. Though there were some signs pointing to the ranking of universities, rankings as they came to dominate the higher education scene were not part of the topography of 1990.[2] However, the "signs" were already present: in 1978, the journal *Scientometrics* was established, and 1993 was the year the International Society for Scientometrics and Informetrics was founded. In other words, quantification was already part of academic culture.

Rankings as Methodology or Ideology?
Comply with and conform to a specific set of criteria, gain points, and make progress in the rankings: this, in a nutshell, is the "philosophy of rankings," the dominant framework that eventually came to condition the functioning of the universities. Forget the traditions that formed each university; forget how much time some academics spend talking to their students after class; forget the time spent innovating new methods of teaching. And make the h-factor and the success rate in bringing funded research programs to the university the sole criteria that define the profile of the academics. Sometime in the 1990s, a "restart" button was pushed, and, much to the delight of the policymakers, university administrators obliged. And in the public sphere, rankings became synonymous with excellence.

There are many variants of rankings. The main ones are the Quacquarelli Symonds, the *Times Higher Education*, and the Shanghai Ranking Consultancy rankings. In addition to these, there are tens of other systems that rank departments, schools, and countries. It is almost impossible to find any kind of academic activity that is not included in some kind of ranking. There have been many well-argued criticisms of the rankings, and even the usually careful and diplomatic UNESCO has been rather critical of them.[3] Quantifying everything that can be made to be quantifiable and ignoring everything that is not quantifiable, doing everything to guarantee a "good performance" in the rankings, and the willingness of many

universities to participate in the globalized marketplace: these all became the order of the day. A good show in the rankings became the almost exclusive aim of university administrations, but even more importantly, the procedures and criteria for a good place in the rankings was what guided the articulation of the arguments of policymakers. A good ranking provides an a posteriori justification for policies that may not have been enthusiastically received at the time of their announcement.

The new hegemonic ideology is aptly expressed by the claim that "if it's not quantifiable, it's not important."[4] Quantifiability and actual quantification have become the ultimate expressions of almost all aspects of policymaking. And it is the quantification of (different) qualities that has been one of the cornerstones of neoliberal thinking. Ever since their founding in the Middle Ages, universities prided themselves on—even legitimized themselves by—giving prominence to the differences among them, rather than to their similarities. What the philosophy behind rankings does is transform the intrinsic heterogeneity of universities into a homogeneity. Otherwise it would be almost impossible for the rankings to retain their prestige. The survival of rankings depends on the application of the same criteria to all the universities. Rankings transform heterogeneity—which had almost been a defining characteristic of the universities—into homogeneity. But homogeneity in this sense does not mean that "they are all the same." It means that each one differs in a quantified and quantifiable way from an ideal type that is being approximated by those universities that are at the very top of the list. In fact, for centuries, universities could be intelligibly compared with each other *because* they were different. Today they are compared with each other because they differ in numbers. In the era of globalization, what is being homogenized is the differences of the universities, often expressed by their historically formed localities. Padua, Bologna, Paris, Rostock, Oxford, and Évora are not just different cities in different counties. They are localities whose historical developments have been intricately related to the development of the universities, and vice versa.[5] "Pluralism is bad, pluralism is backward, in uniformity we seek the bright future": this could very well be a motto of the new era.

Quantification is not independent of the pervasive tendency to think about all aspects of social life in terms of mathematics. I am not referring to the heavy or light use of statistics. I am not even talking about algorithms, which have been the motive force of the digital age. I am talking about mathematization in a similar sense as in rankings, where qualities are quantified. There is a rather heavy "industry" producing the mathematics of murder,[6] tinkering with equations to include ideology,[7] and even inventing an equation for happiness![8] And, of course, one can always refer to the radical metamorphosis of economics—a discipline that has become part of applied mathematics in recent decades—with its strong claims about objectivity. Quantification has forcefully reintroduced a notion of objectivity

cleansed of its subtle and intricate theoretical problems. All serious interdisciplinary scholarship of the past fifty years raised a set of issues concerning the complexity of this notion. Neoliberalism has managed to reestablish strong ties between quantification and objectivity, and numbers have regained their role as the unquestionable mediators in legitimizing objectivity.

Of course, the crucial role of numbers in establishing objectivity has been well entrenched in our practices in the West ever since the seventeenth century. Experimental results expressed in numbers convey "objective facts" about nature. Anyone can repeat the experiments in different locations and different times and still get the same results. It was believed that this could not have been the case unless experiments measured objective quantities. The transformation of "private knowledge" into "public knowledge" due to developments during the seventeenth century was based on this relation of numbers to objectivity. The generalized alchemical culture of keeping secrets waned, and anyone, independent of social status, could practice the new experimental science. Thus numbers were crowned as the ultimate adjudicators of all the virtuous things that the Scientific Revolution had brought about. This legacy was further solidified in the Enlightenment. And it continued almost unchallenged into our day, through the "avalanche of numbers"[9] during the nineteenth century. But then some people in the 1930s, and especially Thomas Kuhn in the 1960s, but most importantly the initiators of the Strong Program of Edinburgh in the 1970s, came to radically question it. It is not the numbers per se, they argued, but the way you read the numbers that gives meaning to them. And you read the numbers through misconceptions, prejudices, biases, preconceptions, and different scientific theories explaining the same phenomena. Importantly, you read numbers because numbers, and the whole framework that brought them about, are immersed in power structures. And the latter are neither ideologically, nor politically, nor socially neutral regimes.[10] Such critiques, which shift the emphasis from the numbers themselves to our reading of the numbers, may very well help us undermine the perception that the "results" of university rankings are almost self-evident objective truths.

Policymakers did their best to convince society at large that universities should leave behind their "old and inefficient" selves. Many consider them as paradigmatic cases of inefficient institutions. There is, indeed, a lot of talk about the efficiency of the universities, and though it is not clear what the exact meaning of "inefficiency" is when it refers to an institution, the way to an efficient future was aggressively sought in the running of universities by managers whose experience had been gained through their involvement in the running of businesses in the private sector. But claiming that "inefficiency" is one of the most serious problems facing universities is another way of saying that democratic procedures are time-consuming. For it is almost trivially true that one of the defining characteristics

of universities has been their accommodation of pluralism in all its hues, and this has been achieved through continuous negotiations of individuals and collectivities with the administrations and the governments. The damning of inefficiency is either motivated by a total ignorance of how universities (should) function, or it is a direct attack on democracy as it has evolved in universities. What is at stake, then, is this very defining characteristic of universities. The imposition of quantifiable categories such as efficiency, productivity, cost-effectiveness, and standards-driven policy as criteria for gauging the overall performance of universities is what has ultimately brought about their metamorphosis. And at the heart of this shop talk about university reforms is the drive to undermine and compromise a defining characteristic of the post–World War II life of universities: democracy. Universities, despite their elitism, had developed into some of our strongest democratic institutions. But universities traditionally have also been places where new practices challenged traditional forms of democracy, new forms of decision-making were tested, and, generally, university life was continuously intermingled with issues of democracy. This is no longer the case. Or, to put it another way, if efficiency has become the dominant criterion for assessing the functioning of universities, then democracy will necessarily be undermined, and eventually it will survive only through its procedural elements. And thus, slowly, and often imperceptibly, democracy in universities has been demoted to its procedural practices, stripped of its dynamic elements.

Some Concluding Remarks

The gloomy outlook can perhaps be somewhat counterbalanced by the unforeseen developments tied to the digital condition. My feeling is that the general repercussions of the digital condition have not been systematically studied by the social sciences or the humanities. Concepts such as place, identity, performativity, and knowledge production will be dramatically transformed in the years to come. And here is another important challenge: to understand technology and its innovations not only through their uses but through the processes by which they came about. The notion of the neutrality of technology, the exclusive emphasis on its uses and the possibilities of its "good" use, is, alas, a very small part of the story. Values, strategies, and all kinds of other social relations are imprinted in technological developments, and it is these imprints that in turn restructure social relations. What are the repercussions of such a state of affairs for universities? In discussing the future of universities, perhaps the closest we can get to drawing a road map is to understand the form and the content of the universities within the overall framework of the digital condition, to understand the space within which universities will be functioning and will be reconceptualizing their identities. As mentioned, the digital condition already forces us to adopt new ethical modes, restructures our working time, imposes styles of reading, affects our teaching, and dictates new research

practices. But above all it will be the rearticulations of democracy due to the digital condition that will mark the new state of universities.

What innovations, concepts, events, and ideas are emerging as people try to work out how to respond to change, or to exploit the failures of "business as usual," or to open up possibilities for new futures? What sorts of disruptive events and processes are emerging that might impact both the present and the future of universities? A crucial aspect of this framework is the inflexion points of what Sharpe et al. termed "horizon 2."[11] Teaching and administrative staff as well as students could become the agents whose collective practices bring about the dynamics that condition and affect this horizon. This complex process of negotiation between teaching and administrative staff and students, on the one hand, and governments, on the other, has, at least historically, been a core factor in readjusting political priorities. What has been presented here can perhaps offer some suggestions for a strategy of resistance against the changes that are being implemented to what for many, many years were considered the defining characteristics of universities.

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Notes
1. The term was coined by critics of neoliberalism. See Williamson, "What Washington Means." For a history of the term, see Williamson, "Short History."
2. For a comprehensive history of rankings from authors who believe that the "impact of international rankings can hardly be overstated," see Downing, Loock, and Gravett, *The Impact of Higher Education Ranking Systems on Universities*.
3. Marope, Wells, and Hazelkorn, *Rankings and Accountability in Higher Education*.
4. Astore, "Students Aren't Customers."
5. Zajda, *Globalization*.
6. Lo and Fowler, "Mathematics of Murder."
7. Leon, "Adding Ideology."
8. Rutledge et al., "Computational and Neural Model."
9. Hacking, *Taming of Chance*; Hacking, "History of Statistics."
10. Beer, "History of Big Data."
11. Sharpe et al., "Three Horizons."

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