



U-Multirank today

Position paper of the Coimbra Group

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Executive Summary. Among the ever growing supply of commercial benchmark tools and league tables of higher education institutions, U-Multirank is conceptually superior in its efforts to compare alike with alike, in its broad set of indicators and its possibility to compare at both institution and subject level, based on any combination of indicators preferred by the user. In its implementation, however, present-day U-Multirank suffers from severe weaknesses, which prevent many institutions from participating or leave the participating institutions disappointed with the outcome. The strongest criticism concerns U-Multirank's indicators, which remain weak proxies of quality for valid international comparison of institutions and the unfortunate fact that the present results are based on unverifiable data provided by the institutions themselves and on imprecise definitions that do not take national differences sufficiently into account and/or could be read differently in different national and sometimes even institutional contexts. It is therefore suggested, in particular to the sponsoring European Commission, to invest European taxpayers' money in the years to come in the development of a high-quality and publicly accessible database of relevant basic data that can be used for meaningful benchmarking of higher education institutions.

1. Rankings are here to stay

Rankings of higher education institutions (HEI) remain a focus of public attention, and Coimbra Group rectors do not act differently from other university leaders. They do not hesitate to warn against the shortcomings and dangers of simplistic league tables, especially when these rank mainly based on simplistic reputation or citation databases, as the more popular ranking methodologies do. Yet rectors look anxiously to the HEI rankings in which their own university scores best and are happy to advertise any step forward in such rankings. Good ranking results often feature prominently on the front page of university websites. This somewhat schizophrenic attitude is mainly explained by the outside pressure of press and politicians, who like simple value assessments of their public universities.

National prestige in rankings, or the lack of it, can have drastic consequences. Institutions have been obliged to merge with the sole purpose of moving up the ranking lists. Many rankings indeed have indicators that are size-dependent (based on absolute numbers of e.g. publications, citations, funding and awards). Financial incentives have been made available by governments with the sole purpose of creating top universities and to promote them into the top of the league tables. The most outspoken initiative is probably the 5/100 initiative in Russia where financial incentives are given to a selected number of institutions, with the direct aim at bringing 5 Russian universities into the international top 100.

It is not only national prestige that counts. Rankings turn out to have financial consequences for universities in that they affect (international) student recruitment. It has become apparent that foreign students, especially from Asia, largely base their choice of a European university on league tables.

2. U-Multirank, the better ranking tool

U-Multirank was created to counteract the shortcomings of the existing rankings. Its main advantages should be to allow inclusion of comparable institutions only (like with like), be multidimensional (focussing not only on research, but also on teaching, knowledge exchange and internationalisation), user-driven (you choose the indicators judged important for your own purpose) and allow for comparison of both entire HEIs and individual study fields (multi-level).

After a number of preparatory years in which the direction to go was discussed and outlined and its feasibility checked, U-Multirank went live for the first time in 2013 and has published its third edition in 2015, involving 1212 universities in 82 countries and focussing on 8 broad subject areas and, so far, 7 study fields. These numbers have to be taken with a grain of salt as for many of the listed universities the data are very limited (often limited to research publication data taken from the *Web of Science*) and the “participation” of institutions outside Europe is extremely limited.

The Coimbra Group participated as an observer in the preparatory meetings. In 2010, when U-Multirank was about to enter a test phase to check its feasibility, the Coimbra Group published a critical assessment of U-Multirank, expressing its concern with the quality of the indicators, selected through some kind of public ballot process rather than through a sound a-priori fundamental reflection. Especially regretted was the fact that the only indicators for the quality of teaching and learning at the institutional level are the graduation rate and the time to degree, since these indicators correlate much better with the “lightness” of a study programme than with its intrinsic quality.

The Coimbra Group member universities took a number of positions with respect to the practical implementation of U-Multirank. Some Coimbra Group universities fully participated in the exercises by providing data. Most found themselves in the U-Multirank tables without actively providing data. U-Multirank apparently included some data about individual universities from the *Web of Science* and from university websites. A number of Coimbra Group universities are also members of LERU, the League of European Research Universities. In 2013, LERU also published a critical statement about the U-Multirank methodology and withdrew from any further collaboration as a group. In particular, LERU criticized the imprecise proxies, the problematic data comparability and the potential for game playing, given the fact that U-Multirank had no intention of verifying the validity of the data provided by its participants.

3. U-Multirank, the hard reality

Today about half of the Coimbra Group member universities abstain from active participation in U-Multirank. There is rising pressure from U-Multirank, backed by the European Commission who invested heavily in the development of the product, on national rectors’ conferences and individual institutions to participate in U-Multirank.

Although U-Multirank is conceptually still perceived as a good alternative to the classical research-based rankings, there is a general disappointment at the present usefulness and reliability as a benchmark tool. The main difficulty arises from the lack of comparable definitions for several indicators in the framework of very different national systems and types of institutions. Even the meaning of basic concepts such as “number of faculty” and “number of students” clearly depends on national interpretations for some special categories. Not to speak of intrinsically vague items such as “regional joint publications” and “spin-off companies”. Many of the requested data are simply not available or very difficult to come by, especially concerning graduate employment. Even within HEIs, it is often found to be difficult to reconcile data from different study fields with institution-wide data.

Because of the lack of transparency in some indicators, there is room for manipulation or at least for interpretations that lead to the best results for one’s own institution. Although the CHE provides some practical help, there is a clear need for a supporting international body that provides more elaborate data and definitions with respect to different national systems and is better placed to check the validity of the data provided.

The trust in U-Multirank’s definitions and collected data is not supported, either, by the fact that U-Multirank gives rise to some very surprising results. The fact that relatively unknown institutions emerge ahead of internationally reputable counterparts is regarded by many with mistrust in the

system rather than with respect for emerging new leaders in the field. This mistrust will undoubtedly remain for as long as the robustness of U-Multirank is not beyond doubt.

The criticism, already formulated by the Coimbra Group several years ago, that some indicators do not measure the quality of education, remains valid. At institutional level, one is only entitled to use secondary indicators such as “time to degree” and “graduation rate” as quality indicators. At study field level, this is somewhat better, as additional indicators are included, such as the percentage of staff with a PhD degree, student-staff ratio, and many aspects derived from a student survey. However, although important, even student satisfaction itself is a poor proxy for teaching quality and its value is severely undermined in case of low response rates or deviating outcomes compared to more tailored national or institutional surveys. In this respect it is surprising and maybe even disappointing that today there is still no effort made to include the results of site visits by international panels of peers in the framework of national and international quality assurance and accreditation agencies in U-Multirank. More and more of these agencies do not only check whether the basic quality is present, but also publish a qualitative judgment about teaching and learning - including learning outcomes - in the assessed study field. Such evaluations are common practice on the “Bolognized” European educational scene, and are potentially so much more useful for a judgment on the quality of teaching and learning in a particular study field than a limited survey among the institution’s own students only, as performed by U-Multirank. However, the gulf between the quality assurance agencies and the rankers is clearly still too deep. Also here, there is need for a European initiative to bring together the two groups, both supported by the European Commission.

The fact that the U-Multirank database is found to be so unreliable and that some of its indicators are so poorly designed is the criticism most often encountered among disappointed participating HEIs. This is especially painful considering the considerable human effort which participating institutions put into collecting and providing data.

4. What now?

In general, the Coimbra Group is of the opinion that U-Multirank should take a step back, i.e. instead of focussing on ranking tools, all efforts should be placed on improving the database. This means

- (1) selecting a better well-thought-of set of truly meaningful and comparable indicators,
- (2) providing clear definitions of these indicators while at the same time providing support to HEIs to interpret these definitions within the different national contexts, and finally
- (3) making sure that the required data are checked for their reliability, stored and exchanged professionally, and made freely accessible for any interested party (both HEIs, private and public stakeholders and the general audience).

U-Multirank should not try to do this on its own. To develop better indicators in teaching and learning concertation is needed with the various agencies guarding quality assurance in higher education and their international networks such as *ENQA* and *ECA*. Many initiatives already aim at improving the definition, attribution and exchange of reliable data and indicators to compare research. To mention just a few: *ORCID*¹, *Eurocris*² and *Snowball Metrics*³. For the collection and checking of data there should be a clear agreement and division of tasks between U-Multirank and the European Tertiary Education Register (ETER). ETER was created in 2013 with the help of the European Commission with the aim “to build a register of HEIs in Europe, providing data on the number of students, graduates, international students, staff, fields of education, income and expenditure as well as descriptive information on their characteristics”. There is much to be gained from negotiations between U-Multirank and ETER and incorporating the ETER databank into U-Multirank.

Finally, U-Multirank should remain a tool for benchmarking rather than a new ranking tool. In this way, it will give credit to various types of institutions and different ways of defining quality. Its major asset, in fact a *conditio sine qua non* to be successful, has to be the possibility to compare like with like.

¹ <http://orcid.org/>

² <http://www.eurocris.org/>

³ <http://www.snowballmetrics.com/>

5. Conclusion

Dissatisfaction and doubts about the present-day U-Multirank dominate among Coimbra Group universities. Yet its basic concepts are considered valuable and the best feasible. In order to gain confidence and respect, U-Multirank must take a step back from its emphasis on ranking and divert its efforts towards improving and unlocking its database and switching to an ‘Open Science’⁴ approach that stimulates evolution of more sophisticated indicators and benchmark tools. One of the policy recommendations resulting from the European Commission’s public consultation on Science 2.0 is that “Open Science can improve the science-policy relationship, for example by a more transparent process concerning the establishment of scientific evidence for policy purposes”⁵. Transparency and open access to the data will enhance U-Multirank’s status as a publicly funded contributor to useful benchmark tools. It should offer an alternative to commercial providers driven by business interests and one-dimensional, often simplistic and deforming definitions of academic quality and excellence.

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⁴ <http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/open-science>

⁵ <http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/news/final-report-science-20-public-consultation>