

Ranking systems and their alternatives for higher arts education?

A discussion paper prepared by the

Working Group Models of Evaluation Higher Arts Education Institutions

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November 2018

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1. Introduction: Is ranking a key issue in the future of higher arts education in Europe?

University rankings have become one of the most prominent ways of judging universities around the world and most importantly in the US.

Ranking has a major impact on a variety of factors: the university's public funding, the number of student applications, the university's reputation and, most importantly, the standing of the students in the "market" after graduation.

Although ranking systems are, for now, less important for universities in Europe, it might have an increasing impact in the coming years.

In the field of the arts, ranking also plays an increasing role, even though the use of ranking for arts universities is still much less significant compared to what is being seen for business schools or law schools. For now, ranking of art schools plays a moderate role in the US and a marginal role in Europe. But this might change, as on the one hand, the art world is becoming more globalised than ever and on the other hand, the MFA for example is becoming, step by step, the mandatory and universal art degree in the US. Without an MFA, it is not possible to "become" or to present yourself as an artist in the US anymore.

This session wants to discuss with ELIA members, if they find it important to look at this development, in order to identify whether to be part of the game or rather not. Is ranking a key issue in the future of higher arts education in Europe?

2. University ranking systems

Universities ranking have existed for a long time. They are made by governments, media organisations, or academic institutions themselves.

At the same time, except for a few examples (such as ARWU), the most famous ranking systems originate mainly in the US. Here, ranking is a huge industry and a highly lucrative one at that. To some extent, this US oriented ranking system cannot be adapted to Europe: it is a very US centric model with criteria that are not shared in Europe (fundraising, endowment size, tuition cost, SAT's evaluation system, alumni contributions and gifts etc.). Wealth is a key element of most US rankings when that element is, in general, less at the core in of the university system in Europe.

At the same time, a different system has been developed in Europe with support of the European Union: the U-Multirank System (UMR). The main difference of the UMR system, in comparison to the US ones, is that it is mainly user-driven. Students are involved in the evaluation (more than 105.000 students contributed to the last UMR rankings in 2016). The U-Multirank System now includes data from over 1.300 universities in more than 90 countries.

The main characteristic of these rankings, may they be from the US, China or Europe, is the difficulty of finding a common set of criteria or a legitimacy for any of these rankings. In addition, both the Shanghai ranking system and the US News & World Report College and University Rankings (to mention the two main general ranking systems) are often criticized and are not unanimously recognized.

Another key characteristic of ranking systems is the large variety of criteria they use, including the number of Nobel Prize winners, the number of students, the overall budget and resources per capita (per student), the proportion of faculty with a PhD and, finally, a very difficult criterion to evaluate, this being the "reputation" of a school. Sometimes, these criteria are disclosed and known; sometimes the "secret ingredient" is confidential and the algorithm process is not disclosed.

A final common characteristic of these ranking systems, with the exception of the Shanghai ranking, is in general their partnership with a media organisation (Business Insider, The Economist, the Daily Beast, Forbes, The Times Higher Education etc.)

3. Opportunities

Given the importance of rankings and the absence of a legitimate art school ranking system, it can be of interest to ELIA members to discuss whether or not to actively enter this field and take action.

A "niche" ranking focused on higher arts education might be a good idea and an efficient one. However, the complexity, the technicity and the cost of developing such a ranking must be taken into account as well as the possibility of the emergence of a competitor, i.e. the emergence of a new sub-ranking (for example by the ARWU as they have done recently for Sports Science schools and Departments).

The following non-exhaustive list must be taken into account when discussing the possibilities of a niche ranking:

- A ranking system for higher arts education would have to be produced by a legitimate and independent organisation, to avoid any conflict of interest. The Princeton index or the Mines Paris Tech indexes failed for that very reason. Which role could ELIA play in this respect?
- Would a ranking system for higher arts education need to be supported by an important media organisation?

- The ranking system for higher arts education would have to produce its own methodology and criteria, including, but not limited to, the number of former students who are artists making a living from their arts, 5 years after graduation and/or the entry-level success of arts graduates in the art market; artists’ assessment & reputation; percentage of faculty with a proven art reputation; percentage of faculty with a PhD in the field of arts or an MFA.
- New tools and criteria are needed to evaluate the reputation of an artist (i.e to adapt the model of the Shanghai Ranking’s evaluation mode for academics to the artists’ model), comparatively including factors such as: winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals (one could list Pritzker prize, Literary prize etc.); number of articles published in journals as Nature or Science (one could list artists mentioned in the New York Times, The Guardian etc; and number of articles indexed in Science Citation Index (list works of artists exposed in Biennales etc.).
- Given the complexity of rankings and the highly technical statistical basis of such a system, consider associating with an organisation already specialised in rankings, or with a US university, which wants to collaborate in this field with a European university.

4. Next steps

Discuss if creating a new ranking system, with a focus on higher arts education, is relevant and desirable for ELIA members. A realistic starting point for such an initiative would require real dedication and a long-term vision. Feasibility will also depend on funding possibilities, that need to be explored, as such a project would only have legitimacy if it was sustained in the long run by a substantial budget.

Depending on budget and time, there are two different approaches and options:

- Option I – The more ambitious approach would be to attempt to create a ranking system for higher arts education from within the ELIA membership. To be efficient, this project would need to be:
 - organised as the model of the “business schools only ranking system” created by the Financial Times;
 - made in partnership with a media organisation;
 - have a substantial budget for several years; and
 - be focused only on Europe at the beginning, then expand to a global ranking system for higher arts education.
- Option II – A second approach, more modest but also more realistic, would consist of creating an alternative ranking system. Instead of rankings, one could produce a guide. This guide would rely on subjective analysis instead of arbitrary formulas and algorithms. It would need these elements:
 - create its own distinct methodology to qualify (and not only quantify) some arts elements in the curriculum, faculties, students etc.;
 - use the issue-specific model developed by the Financial Times for Business Schools, with a more quality-based, rather than quantity-based analysis;
 - rely on large sets of data to present in the guide (not calculated through a formula but displayed as basic data), and finding a way to aggregate this data, based on self-declaration submitted by the universities themselves or by other means;
 - have a jury of experts to make an evaluation for each university; and
 - be made in partnership with a media organisation; and
 - be published on a website year, first in English, and in 2-3 others languages, in the long run.

This second approach should be linked to the creation of a dedicated website.

5. Discussion question

For both approaches and options I and II (or an option III that we may not have thought of yet, such as engaging in the U-Multirank system), we would like to discuss with ELIA members in Rotterdam to see what they see as priorities, and to hear about their experience in this area, concerns, opportunities and additional references. An ELIA working group will then take the outcomes of this first member consultation to prepare a proposal to be presented to the ELIA board in spring 2019.

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