

Acknowledgements

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Foreword

An international conference entitled “Ranking and research assessment in higher education” took place in Brussels at the Université Libre de Bruxelles in December 2007. Some highly important questions were debated during the two days with leading international experts, a number of which were invited to give scientific contributions to the present book.

As appeal, dangers, merits and future challenges of ranking systems are discussed in depth in the introduction made by Dehon *et al.* hereafter, I will focus this preface on research assessment.

Research assessment has been gradually introduced this last decade in European universities and is presently being developed in many other countries. The question of research evaluation is closely related to two hot topics: the ranking of universities and higher institutions, and their funding.

Indeed, most ranking systems take into account some elements of research performance, and there is an increasing tendency in many countries to link part of the funding of an institution to research output scores. This raises the crucial question of what is the best way of assessing the research performance of an institution.

Evaluation instruments are indeed numerous: they are based on peer review or on metrics, focus either on individuals or on research groups, deal with ex-ante or ex-post assessments, consider only research output production or take into account its quality, ... All types of evaluation methods have their own respective advantages and limitations as well as typical bias.

One should keep in mind that the generic goal of any evaluation process is to provide useful feedback to a wide audience. With regards to research evaluation, the targeted audience may be a university’s research management, national authorities, funding agencies, sponsors, ...

The evaluation process should obviously be conducted in a different way depending on the targeted audience, on the goals, and on the level of governance.

While university management might be interested in an effective policy instrument aimed at remediation and research quality improvement, for which there appears to be a common agreement on the need for peer reviews, the focus is gener-

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ally only put on output parameters (publications/citations or other) when ranking or funding are concerned. This raises the question of whether it makes sense to attribute funding either exclusively or even in part based on research. It is important to consider the diversity of a university's missions and its characteristics in order to avoid being confined to a single normative framework.

The use of quantitative indicators in international comparisons and national allocation models makes quantitative research output scores a major issue for universities, even when they are aware that these do not necessarily reflect the quality of their research. Several questions have yet to be answered, such as:

- Should the framework for research assessment and funding make greater use of quantitative information?
- How should we handle the much needed development of a method for producing bibliometric quality indicators? Are indicators such as the impact factor, the citation index, the h-index or the Crown-indicator the most appropriate? What are their possible biases? What restrictions should be put on their use?
- Can a metrics-based system of assessment be used for all subjects, including arts, humanities and social sciences?
- How to assess the relationship between an evaluation and its impact (on various time-scales)?
- While transversal research should be encouraged to generate cross-fertilization, can it be evaluated properly using only metrics?

Considering the importance of these questions and the potential impact of the current and future evaluation assessments on the development of the higher education institutions, it is essential that academic actors as well as evaluation agencies share their expertise and concerns on these topics within the frame of such symposiums.

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