

Let a thousand flowers bloom!



*UNESCO GLOBAL FORUM, Rankings and
Accountability in Higher Education: Uses and Misuses*

UNESCO, Paris, 16-17 May 2011

*Let a thousand flowers bloom! Remarks at the closing
session*

*Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić, UNESCO & Sir John Daniel,
Commonwealth of Learning*

Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić:

Ladies and Gentleman, Colleagues, Dear Friends,

After one and a half days of intense deliberations both in the meeting room and in the halls and gardens of UNESCO, we have come to our concluding session. Sir John Daniel and I have the challenging task of suggesting some highlights for your consideration. Before I begin, let me thank and congratulate all speakers, moderators, chairs and colleagues for the dynamic debates that were conducted.

I shall make 5 points:

First, this Forum is a direct follow-up to the 2009 World Conference on Higher Education which identified various new dynamics in higher education. The dominant trend was massification. Nearly one-third of the world's population (29.3%) is under 15. Today there are 165 million people enrolled in tertiary education. Projections suggest that that participation will peak at 263 million in 2025. Accommodating the additional 98 million students would require more than four major universities (30,000 students) to open every week for the next fifteen years. I don't think we have yet come to terms with the expansion of higher education that is going to take place in the next decade.

Second, student mobility is rising and new patterns are emerging. In 2000, there were 1,825,000 internationally mobile students. By 2009, this figure nearly doubled to 3.3 million. Moreover, patterns of student immigration and emigration are gradually changing. Although the provision of tertiary education to overseas students is still dominated by North America and Western Europe, Japan has been attracting a significant number of international students for more than ten years. China became a major host country in the last two years and others, including India, Malaysia and the United Arab Emirates, aspire to attract ever more international students.

This explosion of student numbers and movements will mean not only a huge increase in numbers of institutions but also in their diversity. When we talk about world class systems – as we have at this Forum

– this means having a range of excellent institutions with very diverse aims. With changing patterns of international mobility students will need more guidance about where to study.

Third, UNESCO’s task is to provide policy advice to governments. This was why we raised this Forum to a higher policy level. We tried to provide advice to policy-makers as they develop their HE systems. Should they:

- Ignore rankings as applying only to a small set of institutions;
- Take them seriously;
- Expand rankings and use them intelligently in the national situation?

Discussions over the past two days have demonstrated that regions and countries must develop rankings using criteria and methods that fit their own situations, as Nigeria and the African Union are doing. For this purpose U-Map and Multi-Rank, which promote a more multi-dimensional approach, could be a starting point, along with the evolving methodologies of the Shanghai and THE rankings.

Fourth, let us remember that the ultimate aim is to help students make choices that are good for them. It follows from the trends of massification and international mobility that millions of students will be seeking higher education at home and abroad without the sources of advice and information that we take for granted.

Let me remind of some of the students’ statements:

“It is clear that there are huge shortcomings regarding the provision of comparable information on HE and programmes. (Allan Pall, Estonia)”

“University rankings are a useful tool for making choices” but “University rankings should not be singular (Vimonmas Vachatimanont, Thailand)”

“Cambridge and Oxford are not best in all disciplines” (Lydienne Machi, Cameroon)

“Internet is the main connector between students and rankings” (Hermina Fonseca, Venezuela) but “30-40% of the population do not have access to Internet” (Colin Robinson, New Zealand)

“UNESCO is an independent body (Joane Chaker, Lebanon) that can “provide objective information about universities (Chelsea Jones, Trinidad and Tobago)”

Five, against this background UNESCO task is help learners find their way through this maze of information through continuing dialogue on these issues with its stakeholders as we have done at this Forum. An important source of information is the UNESCO Web Portal on Recognized Higher Education Institutions. Its aim is to provide students and stakeholders with a white list of accredited institutions provided by governments so that they can check the bona fides of institutions from other countries. The Portal could be expanded to include access to reliable and transparent information about the different types of emerging and evolving rankings around the world and accountability tools, some of which were presented earlier today.

I now hand over to Sir John.

Sir John Daniel

Your Excellencies, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is an honour to follow Stamenka and expand on some of the highlights that she has identified.

Higher education is in a state of rapid evolution, not to say turmoil, in many parts of the world.

Rankings are evolving quickly too. UNESCO represents the whole world, so it is very appropriate that this UNESCO Forum has revealed the timid beginnings of a democratisation of rankings.

I shall make four points under the headings:

- The dog that didn't bark.
- Let a thousand flowers bloom.
- Below the tip of the iceberg.
- What about teaching?
- Congratulations to the team.

The dog that didn't bark

An important highlight of any conference is what was not said – the dog that didn't bark. Until Stamenka mentioned it just now that dog was massification. Coping with expanding demand was the number one challenge identified at UNESCO's 2009 World Conference on Higher Education.

It is worth repeating the figures that Stamenka just gave.

30% of the population is under fifteen. If you accept the forecast for enrolments – and few people have ever overestimated the growth of higher education – the arithmetic is easy. The world will need to create four sizeable new universities every week for the next 15 years or adopt alternative approaches. It is therefore very hopeful that this Forum has put increasing emphasis how rankings can help the creation of world class higher education systems rather than a few world class universities.

Let a thousand flowers bloom

The consequence is that rankings have reached the stage, both nationally and internationally, of encouraging a thousand flowers to bloom. As Stamenka emphasized, by inventing rankings based on a wide range of criteria we are helping different types of institutions within diverse higher education systems to compare themselves usefully with their peers. By becoming more diverse rankings are now more complementary to the process of benchmarking that has been promoted here as a better approach to quality improvement and mission focus.

I pass good examples of the use of these more diverse rankings on my way to work in Vancouver each morning. These are recruiting advertisements for the University of Northern British Columbia, a respectable public university.

The captions on the left-hand ad, all taken from rankings say:

'Research University of the year among small universities'

'Best small university west of Atlantic Canada and third overall'

'Top Campus Sustainability programs in North America, UNBC and Harvard'

And the academic pictured is 'the winner of the top award in her category of the Rising Stars of Research competition'.

Obviously the marketing people at UNBC thought the link with Harvard deserved an ad of its own.

Below the tip of the iceberg

What this means is that rankings are now reaching below the tip of the higher education iceberg. There are some 17,000 higher education institutions in the world and rankings used to be just about the top few hundred. One reason that rankings were so controversial was that they ignored the generality of global higher education. For this reason, holding a meeting on rankings was like opening a can of worms with the tip of the iceberg!

Twenty-five years ago, when I was president of Canada's Laurentian University, *Macleans* magazine was beginning its work on rankings and quickly discovered that publishing university rankings greatly boosted sales of the magazine. Methods were crude in those days and basically consisted of asking the aristocracy to identify the aristocracy. It made me think about different criteria that could be used.

Laurentian University occupies a large campus of lakes and forests in northern Ontario and I concluded that if we ranked the world's universities by the number of beavers on their campuses, Laurentian would probably come top. I mean real beavers, not just hard-working students, although we had those too!

Ernie Boyer made this point more seriously in 1990 in his seminal book *Scholarship Reconsidered*, saying:

'We need a climate in which colleges and universities are less imitative, taking pride in their uniqueness. It's time to end the suffocating practice in which colleges and universities measure themselves far too frequently by external status rather than by values determined by their own distinctive mission'

It is good to see rankings evolving to take more account of distinctive missions.

What about teaching?

This brings me to point four – what about teaching? To help the generality of higher education rankings must address teaching, yet not very long ago Phil Altbach could ask the question: 'where is teaching in the rankings?' and answer his own question, 'in a word, nowhere!'

Various efforts are underway to develop methods for ranking teaching quality and I wish them well. But do not expect to be popular! My favourite ranking table is this one from the UK Sunday Times. This is a very solid table because it is based on data gathered over nine years of national assessments of teaching quality, discipline by discipline.

However, this ranking is now frozen in time. In 2004 those universities whose positions in this ranking did not match their own perception of their prestige sent their vice-chancellors to ask the Prime Minister to stop the process – which he did. You see something similar today in the attitude of universities that decline to take part in multi-ranking systems.

Let's hope such childish attitudes will change as rankings become more sophisticated.

Conclusion

Before handing over to our Assistant Director General for Education, Dr Qian Tang, for the *mot de la fin* I must offer congratulations and pay a tribute.

First, let me congratulate UNESCO's higher education team on organising a most successful forum.

Second, many of you know that Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić will leave UNESCO this summer.

This Forum on Rankings will be the last of many seminal events that she has organised over the years. In an association with UNESCO that has seen her attend no less than 17 of UNESCO's General Conferences in various capacities she has become the face of UNESCO Higher Education in the outside world. Most recently, in 2009 she organised the World Conference on Higher Education whose discussions led directly to the holding of this Forum on Rankings.

Later that year she was voted *International Higher Education Professional of the Year* by her peers around the globe. On behalf of that international community I want to thank her for a tremendous contribution and I ask you to join me in showing your appreciation of her work.