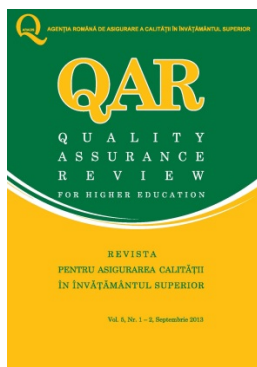




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Ranking the Romanian Departments of Sociology. Comparative Results of Different Evaluation Methodologies

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Rezumat: În articolul de față discutăm despre ierarhizarea programelor de studiu românești din domeniul sociologie, pe baza indicelui g succesiv la nivelul departamentelor de sociologie. Nevoia și consecințele ierarhizărilor din învățământul superior reprezintă un subiect intens dezbătut. Astfel, vom chestiona ipotezele și logica ce stau la baza oricărui exercițiu de evaluare și ierarhizare. Ulterior, ne concentram pe o metodologie specifică de ierarhizare, bazată pe indicele g . Totodată, vom arăta că metodologia oficială alternativă, fundamentată pe un număr considerabil de indicatori, care măsoară așadar comprehensiv conceptul de calitate, produce în mare aceleași rezultate. În cele din urmă vom discuta despre avantajele și dezavantajele utilizării unui index sintetic (precum indicele g), comparând cu exercițiile de evaluare care se bazează pe indicatori și dimensiuni mai numeroase.

Cuvinte cheie: ierarhizarea programelor de studiu din domeniul sociologie, indice sintetic, indicele g

Abstract: In this article we will discuss the ranking of the sociology higher education study programs in Romania, on the basis of departmental g -successive index. The need and consequences of rankings in higher education is a much debated topic. Thus, we will look a little bit into the assumptions and the logic that underpins any evaluation and ranking exercise. Having done so, we will stumble upon a specific ranking methodology that is largely based on g -index. We will nonetheless show that the alternative official methodology, based on a considerably higher number of indicators, though measuring more comprehensively the concept of quality, largely produces the same results. We will eventually discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using synthetic indexes (like g index for instance) comparing with evaluation exercises that take on board more numerous indicators and dimensions.

Keywords: ranking of the sociology higher education study programs, synthetic indexes, g -index

Introduction

In the current paper we will undertake a ranking of the Romanian Sociology Departments using a methodology that has been developed by Vîiu, Vlăsceanu and Miroiu (2012), an alternative methodology to the official ranking methodology developed and applied by the Romanian Ministry of Education in 2011. The alternative methodology takes equally into account research and teaching indicators using a much smaller number of indicators than the official methodology. We aim to compare the two rankings and to test the plausibility of a unifactorial model behind the quality concept that is evaluated in these university rankings.

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Context

The ranking of the higher education study programs is currently a very debated issue worldwide. The advancement of the New Public Management (Hood 2011, Hood, James, Peters and Scott 2004, Hood 1998, Margetts, Perri 6 and Hood 2010) has brought the ideas of competition and measuring output in fields which were previously seen as too complex and having too general and vague objectives in order to be effectively and realistically measured let alone compared. Nonetheless, the more operational and universal the definition of universities' objectives have been stated in several international policy documents (Various inter-ministerial declarations), the more pervasive the idea of developing indicators for measuring universities' performance as regards their stated objectives. Also, inter-institutional and inter-departmental comparisons of performance across different dimensions like teaching, research or community engagement as well as benchmarking key achievement levels have become more widespread. The public responsibility of universities has begun to gradually change from being focused on processes and inputs to outputs and outcomes. But measuring the performance is not a neutral evaluation exercise. It has two crucial consequences: first it informs the prospective clients on the strengths and weaknesses of a particular provider of study programs; by doing so, it reduces the information asymmetry between the buyer and the provider of study programs and makes the market more competitive. Secondly, it informs the public decision makers of the effectiveness of public spending and consequently impacts upon the policy process: study programs which are more performing than others (in terms of learning or research outcomes) shall be financed by priority. If measuring the performance of the higher education institutions and programs is a largely accepted idea than the idea of *competition* between similar institutions/study programs cannot be avoided.

Further, if the idea of competition spills over, rankings of institutions and/or study programs are the means to stimulate it. By ordering the study programs and/or institutions according to their measured performance, those most performing will be more able to attract financial resources and students. However, the strongest critique of the rankings is based on the idea of *institutional diversity*; rankings or league tables are by definition reductionist, they compare the organizations/departments along a single composite measure; it is argued that, by changing the methodology, using different indicators or different weights, we will have different rankings according to the particular strengths of higher education institutions (hereafter, HEIs) or study programs (most usually teaching or research focus). This critique assumes the diversity of HEIs and their different specialization on research and teaching respectively. Therefore, the main problem in generating a single rating is to what extent will such ranking be valid for different profiles of institutions (teaching and research for instance)? How shall performance be commonly measured? How do we define the core objectives of study programs for instance and their weights in assembling a single performance index? What are the various dimensions of quality that should be taken into account when measuring performance? Eventually, how do we decide between quantitative evaluation and qualitative appraisal? These are important questions which should be taken into account when deciding on a comprehensive ranking which informs the policy making at least with regard to financial allocations. Nonetheless, notwithstanding these debates, our hypothesis is that, for the sociology departments in Romania we have an underlying unifactorial quality model and quite little horizontal differentiation which allows us to make valid rankings (vertical differentiation) inside the comprehensive set of sociology departments.

Quality Approaches

First, let us stumble upon a definition of quality. What exactly is the performance that we want to measure? How do we define quality in higher education? In general, there are two dimensions corresponding to the objectives of the study programs: research and education. A third one, community engagement, also becomes widely used in the evaluation of both programs and HEIs. Also, there are