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Keynote speech

Rankings: A Challenge to Public Policy? Reflections from Poland's Perspective

Dear Chairmen, University Presidents or Rectors, distinguished Guests,

thank you for inviting me today to speak at this conference which I find very important for the development of reliable and responsible university rankings. I would like to make some observations about the rankings from the public policy perspective, and to share with you some experiences from my public service in Poland.

I would like to start with the well-known saying that the world is increasingly becoming a global village. Due to the development of transport, notably air transport, the world is shrinking. Nowadays, airlines carry more than four billion passengers a year – passengers who travel over longer and longer distances.

The expansion of information and communication technologies allows for a piece of information produced in any geographical location to be available anywhere in the world immediately after it has been posted on the Internet. Simultaneously, the amount of digital information is growing exponentially – the length of time in which the quantity of information increases by the amount equivalent to the information output of our civilization from its very inception to the end of the 20th century is measured in days at this moment.

Thanks to these changes, the scope of opportunities available to us is getting broader. That applies not only to young people who may undertake education at virtually any university around the world, but also to enterprises which can expand their business to new foreign markets.

Taking full advantage of the opportunities available today requires making good decisions. A prospective student who wants to gain a solid education faces the choice between different study programmes offered by dozens – or even hundreds – higher education institutions. The amount of information on available options is so large that individuals are not able to carefully assess all of them. Furthermore, the quality of some of the information published on the Internet is rather poor. How are those individuals supposed to pick out from this ocean of information only the relevant clues?

Entrepreneurs willing to expand their business to new foreign markets face similar dilemmas. A vast amount of information on the business environment in other countries can be found

on the Internet. However, which sources of information are reliable? Contracting a notable consulting company is beyond the financial capacities of many small and medium-sized enterprises.

Such a situation creates the demand for rankings as a source of verified and reliable information that reduces the complexity of a problem to its most relevant aspects. Social expectations for rankings are clear – rankings should provide trustworthy information allowing to dismiss alternatives that do not meet our criteria and narrow down the range of choice to the most appropriate options.

Rankings have significance not only for individuals and entities facing a problem of choice between numerous options, but they also have their import in the public domain. Rankings that contain indicators describing different entities or countries are used for benchmarking purposes, to see how well – or poorly – our country or our institution scores compared with the others. For a number of years, university rankings have been relevant for decisions taken in some countries regarding, for example, internationalisation strategies or recognition of qualifications. Rankings can also spark an intense public debate which may result in deep reforms.

Let me take this opportunity to share with you a story from Poland which can serve as a perfect illustration of how big an impact rankings can have on public policy. Eight years ago, the European Commission published a register of regulated professions. Poland was ranked at the bottom of a simple ranking of Member States according to the number of regulated professions. This striking information on Poland having the highest number of regulated professions in the European Union led to a vigorous debate at the national level. The public became aware that conditions for access and exercise of many professions in Poland were overregulated.

At that time I served as Minister of Justice and in that capacity I was in a position to carry out a systematic and comprehensive analysis which regulations were justified and initiated appropriate legislative amendments. This eventually resulted in the adoption of 3 legal acts deregulating, entirely or partially, 248 professions in Poland – the most thorough reform of this kind in the European Union. The ranking which I am referring to was very simple, but had the merit of demonstrating the severity of the problem in a way that was meaningful to the public. Rankings may thus have a big impact on the public – bigger than one might think.

A huge potential impact of rankings places considerable responsibility on their authors. The principles for the preparation of rankings should provide for full transparency. The ranking organizations should be independent of the entities being assessed, free from suspicions of any conflict of interests. An essential prerequisite for ensuring the high quality of any ranking is the high quality of the input data. We observe positive changes regarding the quality of rankings. It is commendable that the IREG Observatory, our host today, is doing its share in

pushing for transparency and high standards in academic rankings. However, some important challenges still remain.

Above all, rankings reflect the research output which can be relatively easily measured and internationally compared. Research is, by all means, at the core of academic work. However, the mission of universities is far more complex. Ranking organisations face a real challenge of finding proper ways of measuring also the quality of teaching as well as collaboration between academia and industry.

The next issue I would like to touch upon is a reputation assessment which plays a significant role in some academic rankings. This assessment is based on the results of surveys amongst researchers. I once tried to find out in which countries the respondents worked, what their research areas were, what criteria a researcher must meet to be selected to the survey, or what the survey response rate was. Unfortunately, I couldn't find answers to these questions and I ended up with the feeling – I am sorry to say that – that the reputation assessment was not very transparent.

The way data are obtained is also an issue. Universities report many data on their activities to national statistical authorities or other public institutions. However, they are also required to report similar information to ranking organizations, which entails additional administrative burdens and may undermine the quality and comparability of data. Reusing the data already submitted to statistical authorities would make rankings more reliable. This would not only allow to avoid this extra burden for universities, but would also mean that we obtain the data that were already verified and meet certain standards imposed by international organisations and institutions such as the European Commission, OECD or UNESCO.

If rankings are successful in overcoming those challenges, they would make the global university race much more fair and transparent. They could also better reflect the qualitative changes taking place in some systems.

Following my appointment as Minister of Science and Higher Education in November 2015, I was quickly convinced that the Polish higher education and science system required a quality-enhancing transformation.

The rationale behind the reform was very strong and it related, among other things, to overcomplicated regulations limiting the autonomy of universities, unsatisfactory visibility of outcomes of research carried out in Polish institutions as well as concerns regarding the quality and relevance of study programmes and the efficiency of doctoral training. However, it was the position of Polish universities in international rankings that was the most striking argument for the public and became one of the key justifications for deep changes. The position of Polish universities in the rankings is by no means satisfactory, even though we observe progress in so-called rankings by subjects – in the case of several disciplines, our universities are ranked in the top hundred. However, the position in institutional rankings, which are still the most influential, is definitely below the potential of Polish science.

The reform revamps the logic according to which the system functions. It aims at giving the universities more freedom, increasing the impact of research performed in Polish institutions on world science as well as at improving the quality of education provision for students and of doctoral training. A higher position in rankings is not a goal in itself, however we believe the changes will directly or indirectly help Polish universities to improve their international visibility.

The reform came into force last October. Its adoption was preceded by a long process of dialogue with stakeholders. The authentic participation of the academic community in designing the new law was our principle for various reasons. In particular, we wanted to create a sense of ownership among academia, which - from my point view - is a prerequisite of effective implementation of systemic changes.

First of all, Polish universities have now much more freedom in shaping their internal structure. They have also much more financial autonomy. This gives the institutions far greater control and a much wider scope of decision-making about spending. Universities will no longer be federations of loosely connected units: the key provisions of the law now apply to the university as a whole rather than to its faculties. This is a fundamental change which makes the universities more manageable and allows them to take full advantage of their scientific potential.

Modernisation of the research landscape in Poland is one of our priorities. We believe that the new framework for institutional evaluation of research performed in Poland will be a key driver for improving international visibility of Polish institutions. The role of the evaluation in the system is significant – its outcomes have an impact, among other things, on funding and on universities' powers related to scientific degrees conferment. The new framework shifts the emphasis on quality and supports scientific excellence, understood as participation in the global academic discourse. It rewards the quality and international impact of research instead of the quantity of publications. The new evaluation model is a very strong incentive for researchers to make an effort to publish articles in journals with the highest impact rate, which are indexed in leading international bibliographic databases. In the context of this conference I must also emphasise that we paid a great deal of attention to decreasing the risk of data manipulation so that the information provided would refer to scientists who are truly connected to a given university.

Moreover, the Ministry has recently launched the first edition of the “Excellence Initiative – Research University” programme. It aims at selecting a group of leading Polish institutions with the potential to become research-intensive universities performing world-class research and top-level, research-based education. The programme allows for selecting up to 10 universities which would receive additional funding for a period of 7 years, equal to 10 per cent of a regular subsidy from the public budget. A university applying for additional funding should present a development plan which would be a part of an agreement with the Ministry. The plan's implementation will be subject to mid-term and final evaluation.

We have also opted for transforming the model of doctoral training. The low efficiency of the previous framework was one of the key arguments in favour of this change. The new model will be based on interdisciplinary doctoral schools. We will treat a PhD student as a young researcher rather than as a third-cycle student. Performing research and drafting a doctoral dissertation will be at the centre of the training. In principle, each PhD candidate at a doctoral school will receive a monthly scholarship that will also contribute to their social insurance records.

The reform has introduced far more quality-enhancing changes related, for example, to study programmes, academic career paths or the role of higher education institutions located outside the main academic centres.

Last but not least, the reform would be hard to implement if sufficient funding had not been secured. We managed to ensure broad support for the reform within the academic community, which bodes well for the reform's effectiveness. This in turn was a condition for achieving the common consent needed to significantly raise the funding for science and higher education. As a Minister responsible for this sector I must never really be satisfied with the level of expenditure that the Minister of Finance agrees on. However, an increase in funding, pegged to GDP growth, was eventually laid down in the Law on higher education and science.

I am convinced that the reform of science and higher education will contribute to the improvement of the quality of Polish universities. However, better positions in rankings should be a side effect of those qualitative changes. The public in Poland would notice such a positive shift. This might then be a strong argument in favour of securing a further increase of expenditure for research and higher education. On the other hand, if such a change in rankings does not happen, it would be much more difficult to convince the public and my fellow ministers that spending even more on universities is still justified.

I am aware that ranking methodologists do not always understand the changes that take place. This applies to all rankings, even the reputable ones among entrepreneurs like the World Bank's "Doing business". When I was Minister of Justice, I introduced a number of changes to the laws shaping the business environment in Poland. Thanks to the new arrangements, like one-stop shops and new provisions concerning enforcing contracts, business operations became much easier. These are the aspects of doing business that are included in the "Doing business" ranking. Although these changes were already in force, we had to convince the "Doing business" methodology staff that they had really happened.

For the qualitative changes at Polish universities to be noticed in the rankings, a necessary dialogue with the methodology staff of the ranking organisations is needed. Participation in this conference is one of the opportunities to explain the quality shift in the Polish system. I am convinced that both the reforms and such a dialogue will result in a positive change in the perception of Polish universities around the world.

Thank you for your attention!