



POSITION PAPER

THE REPUTATION OF UNIVERSITIES

Víctor Pérez-Díaz and **Juan Carlos Rodríguez**
Analistas Socio Políticos, Research Center



Universidad
de Navarra



Fundación Europea Sociedad y Educación
European Foundation Society and Education

This document lays the groundwork for an initial approach to the concept of reputation applied to universities, in an attempt to open up a line of discussion, both academic and public, regarding the scope and implications of that concept. Society and Education, a recognized partner in the project “Building the reputation of universities” coordinated by the Universidad de Navarra, has gratefully received the collaboration of Analistas Socio-Políticos, Research Center, for writing this *Position Paper*.

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1

The debate on the reputation of universities

In both public and academic debate, especially in the developed world, the past three lustra have witnessed a renewed interest in the question regarding the reputation of higher education institutions. The governments are concerned about whether or not the universities of their countries are among the top positions of the international rankings on reputation. The academics use these positions as a quality index of the university systems. The leaders of universities incorporate the management of both the image and reputation of their universities into their tasks, many of them involved in a growing competition for attracting students (and their fees), professors and resources for research. The professors with the most academic and research ambitions aspire to carry out their work in the institutions with the best reputations.

Most likely, the two most important factors for understanding the reemergence of the concept of university reputation in public debate are, on the one hand, the transformations in which many systems of higher education are immersed and which head them into a line of greater competition among universities; and on the other hand, the availability of a new tool for measuring rep-

utation, that of university rankings, widely used by the participants of the public debate on universities.

GREATER COMPETITION AMONG UNIVERSITIES

In many countries, beginning with the English-speaking ones, a variety of reasons explains that the universities have felt the need to compete amongst each other for attracting students and professors and obtaining funds. Two of the main reasons are: an increase in the scarcity of public funds and the rules for allocating public research funds.

Most likely, the basic reason would be the increased relative scarcity of public funds, resulting from the fiscal limitations that the governments of many developed countries have reached over the last few decades. In many of these places, the public financing of universities has ceased growing or is even decreasing, and, therefore, the universities face a new situation, which involves several possible combinations, not necessarily stable, of the two following decisions. On the one hand, the universities can adjust their expenditure to a lower income; on the other hand, they

can resort to nonpublic sources of income such as the enrollment fees paid by the students.

However, it is not that easy to adjust spending if one's aim is to attract more students and/or to make the students pay higher fees. The university management teams may try and persuade these students that the cost of their education is what it is, that public financing (if it exists) only goes so far, and therefore, if the student wants to benefit from this education, he must pay a larger share of the cost. Attempts can also be made to convince said students by reminding them that the larger part of the gains obtained from higher education are private, and will be seen in their future income or social status, and that only a small part would be a public good, reverting to society.

They can try this and have success without major difficulties, or they can try this and face important obstacles. The latter is the case in many European countries, in which students' resistance and protests against fee increases may make the governments or the universities afraid to carry out the planned increments.

University management may also combine the attempts at persuasion with a better or more attractive university offer, which usually results in an increase in expenditure, thereby complicating the decisions regarding the specific adjustments that must be made. Something similar to this must have occurred in American higher education over the past few decades, with high increases in tuition fees, not necessarily linked to a greater quality in the university offer, and many times associated with non-central elements of the college experience, which could easily be described as "luxuries" or "extras". In any case, one does not even need to refer to the increase in lavish spending to understand why a better offer usually implies more expenses: if a university wants the best professors, good salaries must be offered to them.

University managers can also apply a policy of spending adjustments and, for example, reduce the costs of the professors' salaries. In the United States, this has involved a greater recourse to part-time contracts linked to low salaries and almost no prospects of getting job tenure, and the number of postgraduates used as teachers has also increased, reserving senior professors for research and for postgraduate teaching. The problem is that a large share of the funds that private and public universities obtain depends on being able to keep a sufficient flow of undergraduates, who, in the long run, will not likely be attracted by a second-rate college experience.

Obviously, the professors' interests also go against a policy of adjustments to a lower supply of funds because they generally tend to resist salary reductions or a loss of purchasing power.

In a nutshell, the greater scarcity of public funds makes universities more dependent upon funds provided by the students and their families and therefore, they must compete more for this group of people. We should not forget that more and more frequently, a large part of public financing is linked to the number of students that the universities are able to attract.

Likewise, more and more frequently, the allocation of public (and private) funds for university research (be it as individual researchers, research teams or networks, research institutes, etc.) leads to one or another kind of competitive assignment. On the one hand, university departments' funds or teachers' salaries, depending on the country, are more related to research output, that is, to scientific publications in prestigious journals. On the other hand, national institutions (such as the United States National Science Foundation) or international institutions (such as the European Research Council) finance projects in a competitive manner, normally including some sort of peer-review. Therefore, to the extent that higher education institutions aim at carrying out research work on a decent level, they must compete among themselves for talent; they must have professors and researchers of a sufficient degree of quality so that sufficient research funds may be obtained.

If the universities have to increasingly compete amongst themselves, they have to understand how they are being perceived by the publics that are relevant to that competition, meaning the students, the professors, the private and public financing bodies, and the rest of the universities. This means that they must concern themselves with their reputation, building it up and maintaining it.¹

A TOOL FOR MEASURING REPUTATION: THE RANKINGS

Below we will deal with university rankings more specifically. Here we will only deal with their significance in the revival of the debate on university reputation. The important aspect is that, in the most competitive environment that we have just roughly described,

¹ A good review of the bibliography on the marketing strategies that universities develop in an increasingly competitive environment, in Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006).

rankings have been regarded as useful indicators of reputation by many of the participants in the discussion.

Obviously, international rankings covering universities from all over the world are the indicators that have ended up having the most importance in the international public discussion on the innovation capacity of countries, on the quality of their higher education systems, on the international competition for talent, etc. These rankings' easy adoption as measures of reputation may be related to their relative simplicity, not so much in its methodology (which may not be that simple) as in the final product: the quality of any university is summed up in a single score that is published in successive years. This has two advantages. On the one hand, it allows hundreds of universities to be ranked according to their quality, allowing each university to easily perceive its place in the classification and the observers to make judgments regarding the higher education system of any country by averaging the position of this country's universities, or simply by counting how many of them are in privileged positions. On the other hand, the ranking system allows people to observe the evolution of these positions across time, thereby converting the publication of the rankings into an annual event, not only in the aforementioned academic and public debates but also in general public discussions. So, university rankings play in higher education a role akin to that played in general education by PISA results.

Hence, the international rankings have served both as an input in the conversation on university reputation and as a measure of reputation itself. In the latter regard, we have to cite the recent Times Higher Education World Reputation Ranking, dedicated since 2011 to measuring university reputation.

In any case, international rankings were not the first to appear on the scene. Their predecessors are of a national scope, and were first published in the United States in the first half of the 1980s. The first one was the "America's best colleges report", first published by U.S. News & World Report in 1983 and published annually since 1985. We mention it here because one of its products is indeed a ranking of colleges and because it not only contains this classification, but also rather rich information that the students use when choosing a college. This wealth of information, in the tradition of the guidebooks comparing universities (still published today), and the fact that the students take it into account when making their decisions to enrol one college or another appeals to a more com-

plex idea of university reputation than that which comes with the usual rankings, an idea that we want to develop in this paper.

2

Significance of the concept of reputation

With time, the discussion on university reputation may end up disappearing like other passing fads, or like something typical of hard financial times, or like a mere response to data (the rankings) that seem to demand that the actors concerned take a stance. However, this disappearance is not very likely because the reputation of universities (as such, or of their schools, or of their researchers or teachers), just like reputation in other walks of life, is a deep-rooted social phenomenon.

The current revival, of the discussion on universities reputation may not yield much more, but it will not stop the reputation of the universities from being relevant to a lesser or greater degree. Further on we will explain more specifically what we understand by reputation in general and by university reputation in particular. A quick note is sufficient for assessing the relevance of reputation. Ultimately, the reputation of an institution or an individual refers to what everyone else thinks of them, which, obviously, must have some kind of effects.

Reputation is one of the currencies in higher education markets¹. As an example, let us think of the market of students' choice of college², a market which has developed the most in the United States. What factors are involved in the choice of a college? First of all, the preferences of the students regarding the types of college: a 2-year or a 4-year college, one which leans more towards postgraduate studies or one that leans toward the job market, etc. Of course, all of this takes place within a more or less specific framework of pre-

1 Our perspective is somewhat different from that of van Vught (2008), who tends to see university reputation as an end in itself, and competition between universities (rather, the large research universities) as a race for reputation. The goal of this race is to attain more reputation, and so universities try to hire the best teachers and attract the best students. Without denying that there is something of this in the behavior of university leaders, we rather understand reputation as a means to get a variety of resources or to maintain an institutional identity over time, as shown below.

2 Raposo and Alves (2007) collect the main references about the factors behind school choice in higher education. See also Briggs (2006).

ferences for a field of knowledge or for a professional field. Second, we must take into account the economic conditions of choice, closely linked, even in the United States (one of the countries with more geographic mobility), to the convenience of moving to another city or not. Third, quality considerations can also influence the decision; they are hard to measure, but the students have the aid of comparative guidebooks and rankings such as that of the U.S. News & World Report. Fourth, advice from teachers and family also weighs in. Last, choice can also be influenced by considerations regarding the reputation of the schools, something that can be gleaned from the placement of each college in the ranking of interest (Bowman and Bastedo 2009) but goes beyond the ranking, for two reasons. First, because the judgment made by the student regarding a college's reputation is not limited to his or her reaction to the information provided by these reports; it also includes opinions obtained from multiple conversations that are carried out with other institutions and/or persons. Second, because the aspects of reputation (and of quality) that a student may take into account, and the relative importance that the student gives to said aspects, do not necessarily have to coincide with those taken into account by the publications.

The aforementioned, with the corresponding national and local modulations, can be applied to the college choice in countries other than the United States. It may even occur that, in the absence of the wealth of indicators provided by the guidebooks and rankings, the students pay even closer attention to the reputation of the different centers, meaning that which is said or, in the absence of comparative information, that which is rumored about the centers within the social circles of the students (their families, their peers, their high school teachers, information that may appear in the media, etc.).

However, higher education markets are not limited to that of school choice. Another market, very important in certain levels of the United States university system, and also increasing in relevance in Europe, is that for professors and/or researchers. When choosing the universities in which they end up teaching and/or carrying out research professors also take into account multiple factors, including the reputation of the department or school under consideration. An attractive salary, interesting lines of research or teaching to be followed, linked with an abundance of resources may be very important but everything may be in vain if the reputation of the center is not good, that is, if the university department has a reputation of being conflictive, too (or too little) politically correct, of over-

restricting freedom to the newly arrived (or not giving the necessary tutoring to novices), etc. The reasons behind a bad reputation can be diverse, but there is no doubt that they may weigh heavily in a candidate's decision.

Obviously, the scope of these reputational markets varies from country to country. In some countries (United States, United Kingdom, Germany, etc.) it has been traditionally ample. In others, a tradition of endogamous practices has limited the scope to a greater degree, as may have occurred in Spain until recently (Pérez-Díaz and Rodríguez 2001: 138-152).

In addition, beyond the very explicit market of professors, reputation is also common currency in the world of research networks and communities. In this case reputation is, above all, an attribute of a researcher or of a principal investigator and his research team or his followers. Reputation can be one of the principal reasons for carrying out research, including patenting research results (Göktepe-Hulten and Mahagaonkar 2010). Together with other factors, reputation produces effects in terms of who is invited to a congress, a seminar, or to take part in a collaboration project, in terms of selecting co-authors or co-researchers, in terms of who belongs to the peer-review networks or even in terms of who receives more or less funding for research.

The reputation of a university is also relevant in a third market, that in which top managers are recruited. It is surely more developed in the United States than in Europe, a continent in which the top level of government and administration in higher education institutions is less professionalized and it is not so clearly dependent on the interplay of supply and demand. In the United States, the election of a new president is carried out by a board of trustees, generally after having set up a search committee in which representatives from the faculty play an important role. It is not hard to imagine that in their lists of potential candidates search committees give much importance to their reputation as good managers.

In Europe, with an overwhelming presence of public universities, it is more common for the university president to be chosen democratically by a specific electoral body, representing the whole university community, or a governing body (faculty or senate, for example) which has also been elected by members of the university community (Estermann and Nokkala 2009: 14). It is less frequent that the university president be named by a governing board that has not been elected in this

way, with or without the assistance of a faculty or senate. In many cases, the appointments require external validation, usually by the public administration providing the funding. However, even in the case when the president is not elected by a governing board or something similar to an American board of trustees, the reputation of the candidates, along with other aspects, is still taken into consideration. Which aspect of this reputation would be the most relevant is an open question, although it likely depends on local idiosyncratic factors. For example, in countries where the election of a university president is, in part, a prolongation of the political-partisan confrontation by other means, the reputation as being right-wing or left-wing may gain importance, or even that of being a non-politically committed candidate in cases where the majority of the electoral body has opted for breaking away with the dominant local traditions.

Obviously, the advantage of having a good reputation is not just limited to its usefulness in collecting resources, attracting students, or hiring good professors or university presidents. Sustaining a good reputation, and consequently succeeding in obtaining the adequate material and human resources, is an indirect means which allows the universities with differentiated institutional identities to maintain them.

Finally, the reputation of the universities, or rather of their centers, can be important in a market which is not a university market in the strict sense but is, however, decisive for the graduates: the labor market. In the private sector, the entrepreneurs (or the company managers) demand personnel with university degrees, either because they are convinced that such a degree reflects specific knowledge and skills that are useful for their businesses (human capital theory) or because these degrees are a signal that the people who have them have more of the generic skills and attitudes that are the most suitable for the routines of a productive life in business firms than those without degrees (theory of educational credentialism). It is possible that employers do not attach the same value to degrees that, in principle, are equivalent (an economics degree, for example) but are given out by universities with different reputations. In fact, the information on the candidates that the employers have a priori does not necessarily have to be of high quality, and it can be complemented by generic judgments as those that may lie behind their reputation considerations (Brown and Hesketh 2004), which, in any case, do not need to play a central role (Morley and Aynsley 2007).

All things considered, reputation is a common currency in a variety of markets (or quasi-markets) linked to university life, although to different degrees depending on the characteristics of these markets and the local environments in which they work. The contrast between the English-speaking world (represented by the United States) and continental Europe is surely useful for discerning the practical importance of the concept.

3

Research on university reputation

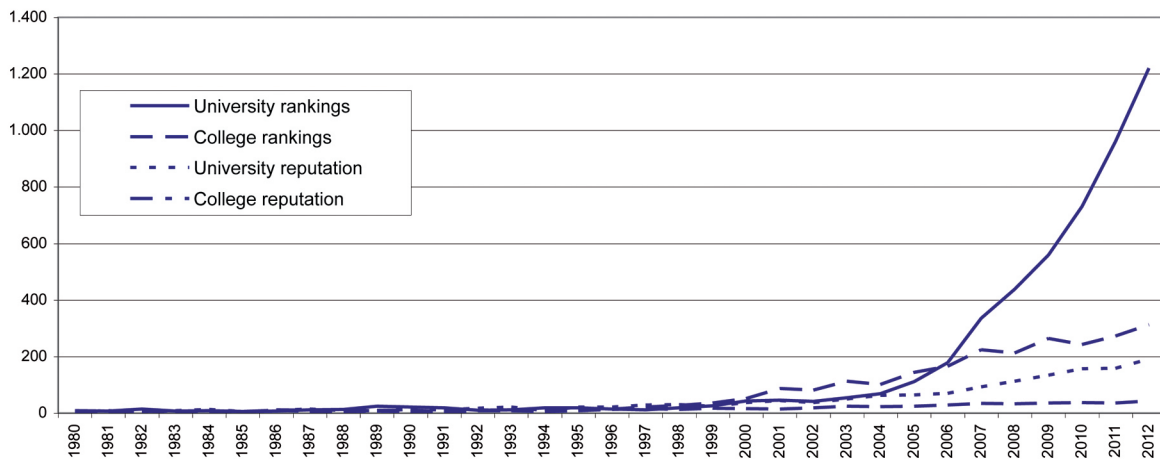
In general, the debate on university reputation is not as lively in the academic research arena as in the public sphere, but it has also awakened in the former.

The academic interest in the concept began to grow slowly around 1990, as can be observed in Figure 1, which shows the annual number of articles indexed by Google Scholar that contain phrases related with our study (university reputation, college reputation, university rankings, and college rankings). The expression “college reputation” showed a gradual increase from the mid-nineties on. The growth in the relative frequency of the phrase “university reputation” accelerated in the five-year period 2000-2005 and intensified afterwards, probably fueled by the discussion on university rankings. As can be observed in the same graph, the number of articles that make reference to “university rankings” stood at the same level as those mentioning “university reputation” until 2004. As of 2005, and especially as of 2007, the scientific production regarding university rankings grew exponentially, far above the growth of the studies on university reputation, most likely due to the success of rankings in the public sphere, such as that of the Shanghai Jiao Tong University, first published in 2003, or that of the

Times Higher Education, first published in 2004. The same graph also shows that the take-off of the phrase “college rankings” is previous, beginning around 1998, which is logical if we take into account that its presence in the United States is much earlier.

Although there are many articles containing the phrase “university reputation”, it does not necessarily mean that they are focused on analyzing it. In fact, it is not easy to find publications that specifically deal with university reputation, especially in an empirical manner. There is still no established tradition of studies on university reputation. The empirical investigations are not abundant, as expected in a field of study that is fairly delimited and new, although we have what we could consider recent classics, as is the often cited study of Nguyen and LeBlanc, “Image and reputation of higher education institutions in students’ retention decisions” (Nguyen and LeBlanc 2001), and there are researchers who are providing a notable impetus this type of research, usually regarding the effects of university rankings, most notably Bastedo and Bowman (Bastedo and Bowman 2010, 2011; Bowman and Bastedo 2009, 2011).

Graph1. Articles Indexed in Google Scholar include the phrase “university rankings”, “college rankings”, “university reputation” or “college reputation” (1980-2012)



Source: own elaboration with data extracted from <http://scholar.google.es/>

To a large degree, the studies on university reputation emerged from lines of investigation such as the studies on organization strategies, especially those of companies, and in particular, marketing studies and studies on the image of companies (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006, Standifird 2005, among others). However, it seems that studies on university reputation are increasingly found in fields such as that of economics of education (Mackelo and Druteikiene 2010, Por-

tera 2006, Tao 2007, for example), using the rankings in their quantitative analyses, sociology of education (Strathdee 2009), or studies on higher education in general, the field in which there is more interest in university reputation (see the already cited references of Bastedo and Bowman, and also: Sung and Yang 2009, Sweitzer and Volkwein 2009, van Vught 2008, Volkwein and Grunig 2005, Volkwein and Sweitzer 2006).

4

A definition of reputation that is simple but rich in implications

Gary Alan Fine (2007), one of today's sociologists specialized in analyzing reputation, distinguishes three sociological approaches to the concept: objective, functionalist and constructed. The objective approach assumes that the reputation of individuals reflects their character and their actions, since others may know them to a sufficient degree. It may be that reputation has elements of social construction but they are faced with a reality that, ultimately, is not all malleable. For the functionalist approach, that we use the reputation of the others in our social life responds to the needs of society and institutions. Certain functions must be satisfied, certain social roles must be carried out, including different positions in a variety of social hierarchies. When vacancies are produced in positions of high status, someone has to cover them, and therefore, it is necessary that we previously have evaluations of the reputation of the candidates to these positions. The third approach supports the idea that reputation is socially constructed, through multiple strategies that interact with each other. Reputation is a result of a sociopolitical process in which some individuals or groups obtain resources, power or prestige thanks to their reputations, and they dedicate a variety of material and, especially,

cultural and symbolic resources to the construction and maintenance of their reputations.

These three perspectives, fairly easy to make compatible with each other, give us a realistic understanding of the reputation phenomenon in general, and more specifically, of the reputation of universities. In terms of society in general, the starting point may be functionalist. There are hierarchies and there is a diversity of roles to be carried out. Mankind has never worked in any other way. Then we need criteria to choose the most appropriate individuals for these positions. Therefore, among other things, we use the criterion of reputation because it is one of the means that we have for judging the adequacy of individuals to social positions or roles. In an absolutely transparent (and unreal) social world, in which we could measure the adequacy of these persons to the open positions with mathematical accuracy, the use of reputations would not be necessary; however, we do not live in this type of world.

Based on the social need to use reputation as criterion for decision making (socially or individually), it is not difficult to see that in order to understand and define

the concept of reputation, we must take into account its aspects of inalterable reality and of social construction. If the character and behavior of individuals (and the behavior of groups or organizations) were totally transparent and we were capable of knowing them fully, the diverse strategies whose interaction results in a socially built reputation would be quite senseless. If we could speak of reputation in these circumstances, we would strictly refer to the reality of things. Obviously, society does not work this way, and therefore, there are large margins for those strategies, especially if the reality in question is difficult to know. If the reality can be known with some certainty then the socially constructed reputation cannot be that distant from it. It helps that the estimation of the reputation of individuals, groups, organizations or countries is not a merely individual cognitive process, but rather is brought about by many. If heard behavior or group thinking do not occur, different perspectives will be considered, illuminating reality more than a single perspective¹.

In terms of the reputation of universities, these approaches would have different consequences, for example, when understanding the professional success of graduates from the most renowned universities (Strathdee 2009). From the objective approach perspective, and probably from the functionalist standpoint, these graduates would earn more than those from universities with a lesser reputation because they are more productive, to the extent that they have been rightly selected and have received a better education. From the social construction standpoint, we should consider whether or not their higher salaries might not be the result of implicit or explicit strategies of social closure (in other words, reserving certain privileges or benefits only for the members of the groups that are the protagonists of these strategies) on the part of those who attend these universities, on the part of the universities themselves, and on the part of the businessmen who end up hiring those graduates.

A simple, but complete, definition of reputation that would adjust to the multiple perspectives that we defend is that of Ronald S. Burt, one of the authors who has studied social networks and social capital the most. In his opinion, reputation is “the extent to which a person or group or organization is known to be trustworthy” (Burt 2008).

The phrase “[it] is known” refers to a process of knowledge and formation of collective judgment, with its socially-constructed components, but it also refers to the corresponding doses of reality (Burt does not use a term such as “is represented”), to past behavior (or past characteristics) of the individual or group in question.

The phrase “[it] is trustworthy” moves us farther away from a definition of reputation as related to any kind of opinion that one may have of a person or group, and it brings us closer to the issue that reputation refers to capabilities such as cooperating with others, fulfilling agreements, carrying out tasks and functioning well, adequately providing services or goods, etc. In such terms, the erosion or loss of reputation may cost the individual, group or organization in question dearly.

As long as reputation refers to diverse capabilities, relative to the needs or demands of different publics, it is possible that reputation may vary according to the contents of these needs and the diverse publics that evaluate it.

Applied to universities, this definition would point towards the need to distinguish between closely related concepts, such as those of reputation, image or brand; this is not always clear in the academic bibliography related to these topics. In our opinion, the image of a university is different than its reputation, because it does not necessarily have to be linked to the actions about which the interested public (students, professors, managers, etc.) expects a greater or lesser degree of trustworthiness, or it can refer to characteristics that have nothing to do with reputation. For example, a university can have an image of being more or less modern, but this tells us nothing as to whether or not it is reliable with regard to educating students, carrying out research, etc.

The brand may also be related to reputation, but more likely on the part of the subject whose reputation is being assessed. Companies or universities may wish that the dominant factor in the public’s perception of them is synthesized by the image of the brand they try to transmit. However, the brand as a summary-symbol most likely will not include all the dimensions of reputation that are relevant to the diverse publics.

¹ With regard to the association between, on the one hand, indexes measuring economic, political, and technological realities, and, on the other, the reputation of the different member states of the European Union, see Pérez-Díaz and Rodríguez (2012).

5

The diverse publics, areas and fields of university reputation

An understanding of reputation such as the aforementioned does not allow us to be satisfied, a priori, with one-dimensional versions of university reputation. Leaving aside for a moment the question of whether or not the different aspects of reputation can be reduced to a single dimension (or to a couple of them), reputation should vary according to the type of public that issues judgments, the geographical area of reference, and, in certain cases, the field of knowledge in which the actors in question operate. Therefore, given the variety of interests, expectations or evaluation criteria at play, the components or elements of reputation should be expected to be fairly diverse.

PUBLICS

We have already talked about the different publics when we spoke of the importance that the concept of reputation has today with regard to the university life. Theoretically, the reputation of universities could vary depending on each public, inasmuch as the interests, expectations and evaluation criteria of each type of potentially interested public are different. This does not mean that if we could reliably measure reputation we would not find substantial coincidences

among the average estimations made by each one of these publics.

At least the following participants in university life and in the conversation about university life should be taken into account. In the first place, we can mention students, both current and future. As we have mentioned before, future students can be guided by the reputation of the universities in their choice of university. The current ones also take into account a university's reputation when deciding whether to remain in their university or switch to another one, something that is not at all rare in some countries, such as the United States (these are the so called "transfer students")¹.

In the second place, one must consider the professors and/or researchers. These individuals may have more direct knowledge related to the centers or departments which they want to join, but we cannot discard the idea of them using reputation to help guide them in their decisions; here, reputation becomes an added criterion to others such as the prospect for an aca-

¹ The text of Nguyen and LeBlanc (2001) studies these decisions of permanence or change

ademic career, salary, work conditions, the intellectual and cultural environment of the center, etc. We have already observed how, to a great extent, academic life, especially in its research dimension, has very similar characteristics to those of a reputation market.

In the third place, we should take into consideration the university managers. They may be the most concerned about their university's reputation and the most keen on comparing it with that of competing universities; this is especially true in countries where competition is more intense, such as in the United States. The judgments of those managers are among the most analyzed in the studies on university reputation because they are included in the ranking par excellence, that of the U.S. News & World Report, in which they carry considerable weight (25% of the total scoring in the case of national universities).

In the fourth place, we should take into account the public officials responsible for regulating and, especially, financing many universities, not only public ones, and not only of their teaching but also their research activities. This would be a public made up of politicians, high-positioned civil servants in ministries and other public bodies, research institutes, rating agencies, etc. Most likely, this public could be studied together with that made up of private institutions that finance university research, among them, foundations and private companies.

In the fifth place, we should consider the private and public employers of the university graduates. This type of public is one of the most analyzed in the studies on reputation, itself a variable that is increasingly being included in the models that attempt to explain the decisions of hiring staff with high qualifications.

Lastly, we could consider the general public, not as a group of individuals (students and their families) demanding university education but rather as the citizens who ultimately finance a large portion of this education in many countries. In this case, we should not so much study their judgments regarding the reputation of one or another university but rather find out about the reputation that is assigned to the entire higher education system of a country, possibly in comparison with how universities are perceived in other countries.

GEOGRAPHICAL AREAS

Although it may be somewhat obvious, we should still recall that the geographical frame of reference in which the publics that make the reputation estima-

tions is not always the same. Almost all of them can operate on different scales: international, national, regional or local. There are students who plan their selection of a field of study on a quasi-global scale, especially among, but not limited to, postgraduate students. Other students plan their mobility on a national, regional or local scale. Something quite similar occurs with the professors. Some of them already pursue their careers in a global market, but others prefer or have no other choice than to work on a smaller scale.

The question of the geographical frame of reference aspect is even more important for the managers of universities in countries in which university hierarchies run along geographical lines. There are, for instance, national and regional (or even provincial or local) universities that usually develop their strategies preferably on the corresponding scale; and it is well-known that the number of large universities planning their strategies on an international scale is increasing.

In the same way, we can find public officials, private institutions that finance university research or employers setting their sights on one scale more than on another.

FIELDS

We cannot consider any of these publics as undifferentiated aggregates. Later on we will offer some suggestions in this respect. Right now, focusing on students and professors, we should point out the hypothesis that the phenomenon of university reputation and its effects may vary depending on the branch of knowledge, of technology, and of the professions in which they move (Strathdee 2009). The contents of reputation can vary. Students in fields more oriented to professional work will likely put less importance on the research reputation of a university than those studying for degrees in physics, biology or chemistry. In addition, in their choice of university the former group of students will probably give a special weight to the ease with which they will later be able to find work, an aspect that is likely less relevant for the second group of students.

In addition, we cannot discard the fact that in each field, the public in question (students or professors) may pay attention, not so much to the general reputation of a university, but to the reputation of that university (rather, their schools or institutes) in the field in question. Above all, this has consequences in terms of the reputation policies that the universities follow, which most assuredly should combine both the general and the specific.

6

The components or elements of reputation

The variety of publics, geographical areas and fields is one of the factors behind the manifold character of reputation. Or, from another viewpoint, this variety means that, a priori, a variety of reputations can be imagined for each university. Each of them would refer to each one of the functions that a university can carry out, to specific issues regarding each of these functions, and to the conditions in which these functions are satisfied.

In this way, a university can have a good reputation as an institution that prepares good professionals for the job market, that carries out frontline research, that provides a general or liberal education for its students, that contributes to foster a more civic or responsible citizenship, among other functions.

Or it may be that reputations are still more specific: as an institution that prepares good top civil servants, one whose graduates find work easily, one that has good placement programs in companies, one that educates the future elites of the country, that produces many Nobel Prize winners, or that increases the social capital (in terms of useful personal relationships) of its students, etc.

Or maybe reputations refer to how the functions are met, and a university has a good reputation for having study programs with stages in foreign countries, or for having first-class facilities, or for promoting cultural life (or sports) among the students, or for recruiting the best high school students, or for maintaining stable ties with nearby, or farther away, companies, etc.

Supposing that all or some of these “reputations” do exist, there remains one last question to address, that if all these aspects, components or contents of reputation are reducible to a single dimension or just a few dimensions so that one could speak of the reputation of a given university and not only about the research reputation, the professional training reputation, the education of elites reputation, etc. To be able to reduce the multiple aspects of reputation to a few dimensions will depend on how the different publics form their reputational judgments and also on the degree of coherence with which the university carries out their different functions. This brings us to the question regarding what type of factors should be taken into account in order to understand university reputation.

7

The factors of reputation

The investigations that adopt a complex approach to reputation, to university reputation in particular, will have to study two types of factors in order to explain how the different publics make their estimates of reputation. On the one hand, they have to consider objective factors, meaning those that reflect, as much as possible, the reality of the higher education institution in question. On the other hand, they have to consider subjective factors, meaning those which shape the interests, expectations and perceptions of those who issue reputational judgments.

The objective factors can be multiple, depending on the geographical frame of reference, the field of study and the public issuing reputational judgments. If we study universities of a regional level, its place in the international research rankings may be of little importance, but the presence or absence of ties with the local production networks could be of more importance. In the same way, if we study university reputation in the field of law, the results of research in the field of physics very likely make no difference. Lastly, if we study university reputation from the viewpoint of private firms as employers, the research performance of a university may not be very relevant but the generic or

specialized knowledge of its graduates would most certainly be.

So, we need a relatively large collection of indicators “of reality” which could be related with the estimations of reputation made by the members of each public, assuming of course that they have a certain degree of knowledge of that reality or those indicators. Many of them are already included in the national and international rankings, but it would probably be necessary to have others which are more difficult to construct. Those readily available usually refer to basic characteristics of the universities: its age, size, whether it is private or public, etc. In many cases, they refer to the inputs of the higher education system: financial resources, other material resources, the student/professor ratio, the professors’ salaries, the proportion of full-time professors versus part-time, the high school academic record of the students, the number of books in their libraries, etc. Output indicators are also available: the ratio of the number of graduates/ number of registered students, the job market performance of graduates, the number of scientific publications by professors, the number of patents, etc. However, it is more difficult to obtain indicators regarding the

knowledge acquired by the students, the added value of the university (how much the students have learned given their starting point), or regarding the teaching methods, or the intellectual environment of the university and its departments, etc.

With regard to the subjective factors, we must first distinguish whether we are talking about one type of public or another. One must keep in mind that, up to now, the majority of the studies that analyze university reputation as a dependent variable tend to consider only two publics, the managers and the professors, just because these are the people whose opinions are collected in the available rankings. The student public is studied when attempting to explain their choice of university, but then the reputation tends to appear as an independent variable and it is not the central point of attention. Likewise, if the reputations of universities are studied without differentiating by field of study, this variable (field of study) should have to be incorporated as a characteristic of the individual who is evaluating the reputation.

Once the type of public to be analyzed (and field of study, when necessary) has been determined, some of its characteristics will have to be addressed, those that could affect their judgments on the reputation of universities. For example, among the students, we can distinguish between those who have just finished high school, the older students, and the foreign students (Soutar and Turner 2002), and, obviously, between the future university students and those who are already enrolled in the university. But it may also be interesting to inquire into the possible effects of the social extraction and other family data of the student, his academic level in high school, his expectations regarding what the university can offer him, his cultural ambitions, his consumption of mass media, etc.

Also, for example, among the professors, we could take into consideration their professional categories, their research experience, their seniority as professors, their connection to research networks, their ideological leanings, their preferences regarding what a quality university experience should be, among other characteristics related to their opinions on university life in general, and on the reputation of universities in particular.

We will not pronounce ourselves a priori regarding what factors will carry more weight in the estimations of reputation, although our work in a closely related field, that of the social prestige of professions and that of primary and secondary school teachers in particular

(Pérez-Díaz and Rodríguez 2013) leads us to suspect that the group of subjective factors is less relevant; not so much those that differentiate publics or fields, but rather the factors most related to the personal characteristics of the individuals. To a certain degree, this could be due to the fact that, for reasons we will not go into at this moment, it is not rare to find consensus regarding the reality of certain social phenomena (such as the prestige of professions), and in the case of university reputation, it is very likely that behind these consensus lies today the main measurement of university quality (and ultimately, a source of reputation) within our reach, university rankings.

8

Measuring university reputation: the issue of rankings

University rankings have ended up playing a central role in the national and international conversations on the quality and reputation of universities. As we mentioned before, the “father” of all of rankings is that constructed by the magazine U.S. News & World Report, first published in 1983, but the current boom of this measuring instrument is due to the rankings of international scope, some of which we have also mentioned (the Academic Ranking of World Universities, elaborated by the Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and that of Times Higher Education). At the United States level, there are a dozen rankings, and at a global level, there are more than fifteen; and there is even a fair amount with a regional (various countries in the same geographical area) or national (about universities in one country) scope. National rankings are usually based on a greater variety of indicators, something very hard to attain on an international level. In fact, the international rankings lean more to reflect the scientific productivity of the universities, and obviously, to the production of articles written in English, the language of the international journal databases.

Next, we discuss the rankings both as a source of reputation and as a measurement of reputation.

All of these rankings can be used by all the publics as a source for their estimations on reputation. In fact, they

actually are used in this way, for they are a very accessible source, not only because they are easily available in the web, at least their main results, but also because almost all of them end up summarizing their evaluations of quality with a single figure, which allows for consequently, to a single hierarchical classification of the institutions. Therein lies, so to speak, the magic of the rankings, but also some of their potential problems, as we will see shortly.

But we can also use the rankings as a measurement of the reputation as bestowed by the different publics to the universities. The ranking of U.S. News & World Report includes a summary indicator of the evaluations made by the presidents and admission officers with regard to the academic reputation of universities other than theirs. The Times Higher Education ranking has always included the results of a poll of professors and researchers, up to the year 2009 strictly focused on research and as of 2010 dedicated to the evaluation both of the research and the teaching performance of other universities. In fact, also as of 2010, the Times Higher Education publishes a ranking which is exclusively based on this evaluation, making it the most useful survey on an international level if we want to measure university reputation as seen by the public of professors and researchers. Also worth of mention are the analyses made by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Edu-

cation in the United Kingdom, which includes a student poll, and a Chilean ranking, prepared by the magazine *Qué Pasa*, which is based on polling entrepreneurs.

There is no doubt that the rankings have been very useful for the different participants of university life. The U.S. News & World Report rankings are very successful and serve as an effective guide for the choice of college made by students and families, most likely due to the summary indicator rather than to the underlying information¹. The diffusion of this example to other countries must be casting some light on a process (college choice) that for most students took place “in the dark”. International rankings, with their limitations, have allowed for the academic discussion on the scientific and innovation capabilities of countries to be conducted with more doses of reality.

Obviously, the rankings have also received their share of criticism², some of which is related to their methodology and some of which concern the consequences that the rankings supposedly entail.

With regard to methodology, first of all, it is obvious that the rankings tend to measure that which is easy to measure, in other words, that which has pre-existing indicators or indicators that can be easily constructed. This involves a probable excess of input and output indicators, not always very related to the real effects of the university on the lives of the graduates and on the environment of universities. This leaves out some of the aspects of university life that could be of interest, factors which affect the quality of the universities, and measurements of this quality that go beyond mere outputs. In general, the critics cite the insufficiency of indicators. Second of all, there is criticism concerning the fact that all the indicators end up being reduced to one, the ranking score, which the critics regard as excessively simplifying device and one that diverts the students’ attention from the underlying indicators. Third, there is usually criticism regarding the weights that are applied to the underlying indicators in order to construct the summary index: sometimes too much importance is placed on research, and too little on education³, and other times

too much importance is placed on the judgments of professors and university managers rather than on more objective indicators. Ultimately, these weights do not reflect the degree of importance that each student gives to each one of the aspects considered in the publication.

With regard to the undesired or undesirable effects that are attributed to the rankings, the following stand out. One which has been determined empirically (Bowman and Bastedo 2011) is the crystallization of reputations. In other words, in the judgment of the participants in the poll (managers and professors), the first editions of a ranking usually carry more weight: even after changes occur in the objective data that should be the base for their estimations of reputation, these are still anchored to the initial data, especially to the initial summary scores.

Probably the most important criticism towards the rankings (and indirectly, toward the excessive attention being given to them) would be the fact that they stimulate undesirable forms of competition among universities (van Vught 2008).

For example, the U.S. News & World Report score rather heavily reflects how much the student body of a college comes from the top tiers of high school graduates, which induces the universities to be even more selective, which, according to the critics, diverts public universities from their traditional goal of providing access to all qualified students (Ehrenberg 2003). Or rankings can contribute to a reputation race with effects such as cost inflation, the growing inequality of incomes among higher education institutions, and a greater stratification of the universities according to the social composition of their student body (van Vught 2008). In the opinions of authors such as those cited above, other rankings that would include other indicators, weighted in a different way, might stimulate healthier forms of competition.

1 The rise and fall of a college in the ranking translates into significant variations in the applications for studying in this college (Luca and Smith 2011).

2 See, for all, Ehrenberg (2003).

3 This is one of the reasons why the Times Higher Education ranking changed, incorporating a poll to professors regarding which universities they feel are the best, not only in research but also in teaching.

9

The management of reputation, and other open questions

This position paper does not intend to offer answers to all the questions regarding university reputation. Neither is it possible, as long as this field of study is very recent and the available *corpus* of research is clearly insufficient. Our work has attempted to draw the main lines of discussion and to offer some criteria for evaluating the possible answers given to questions regarding reputation and for making the discussion more fruitful, both to the different university communities and to decision-makers in the universities.

Without a doubt, the concept of reputation as a common currency in a variety of university markets is important, but what remains to be known, among other things, is how much weight reputation carries in the decisions of the different participants in comparison with other factors that affect those decisions. We have proposed a definition of the concept of reputation that is rich in implications, but it has not been sufficiently explored yet and, in particular, quite a bit of empirical and analytical work remains to be done in order to be able to distinguish reputation from the concepts of image and brand. We are also convinced that the studies on reputation should distinguish between publics, geographical areas, and fields of study, as well as take into consideration objective and sub-

jective factors when explaining reputation. However, there is a need for more empirical research in order to discern if our proposal makes sense or if we should be content with a less ambitious approach. Lastly, one of the hottest questions that remain open is the relationship between rankings and reputation, probably the question that has generated the most controversy and the most research.

Therefore, there are still many unanswered questions which future research may respond to, and which the meeting for which this position paper was written may address. However, if it is really best to start off from a concept of reputation such as the one here proposed, and if the criticism to the usual substitute of reputation in public debates (the rankings) is substantially true, then some interesting implications follow, especially regarding how universities are incorporating or going to incorporate the idea of reputation into their own management. Should they start from understanding that they have a single reputation or one that varies depending on the public or the field involved? Is it possible to manage reputation in the same way a brand is managed, or are there aspects of reputation which go well beyond that of marketing? Even knowing that many participants in the discus-

sion and the competition take into account the rankings in their assessments and decisions, is it logical to allow oneself, somehow, to be blindly led by what the rankings measure, simply aspiring to improve the adequate indicators so as to climb within the classification? In countries like the United States, are they not devoting an over-abundance of resources to something that may have ended up being a mere competition for reputation? Therefore, isn't there an excessive amount of resources being used up and/or are they being diverted from more praiseworthy goals? With respect to this, an important more in-depth discussion could be proposed regarding the ethical considerations of this possible competition for reputation.

Lastly, among other questions still open to discussion, in view of the probable differences among the several university markets, what can European universities learn regarding the management of reputation that is being carried out in the United States? Will the excesses derived from an overly simplified use of the rankings repeat itself in Europe or will European universities take advantage of the positive aspect of rankings, that is, their effects in increasing the transparency of the university system towards all its participants?

We feel that all of these questions can lead to a fruitful and interesting meeting, and in any case they can offer ideas for reflection to all citizens interested in the topic of university reputation.

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