



Beyond the values of reputation: What “races” should universities run?

Host: Georgiana Mihut, Erasmus Mundus Students and Alumni Association

Rapporteur: Eva Egron-Polak, Council Member, Magna Charta Observatory

Throughout the three consecutive table discussions, students and tertiary education institution representatives shared their thoughts about the importance that reputation has in the current higher education landscape and in the context of their universities. More importantly the discussion shifted towards describing other goals universities (should) strive to achieve and be known for.

Leadership representatives from several institutions gave examples on how the reputational race affects decisions at the level of the institution on aspects such as strategy, marketing, establishing partnerships, and allocations of resources. After stressing that rankings affects all university decisions, one institutional representative mentioned “we were asked to work only with top 200 (universities) internationally, but we were able to find sound arguments for working with others as well”.

A representative from a different institution stated that his university will adopt a new strategic plan to focus more on research partially in order to address ranking pressures”.

Students taking part in the second round of the table discussions reflected on how considerations of institutional prestige influenced their decision making process while choosing their tertiary education institution. Their considerations included “national rankings” and the “fear of being rejected from a top university”. Students were strongly aware of the reputational levels of different institutions. However, for the few students who attended the table discussions, other criteria, such as cost and proximity/distance to home, seemed to dominate the choice of a university.

While acknowledging various influences exerted by rankings and reputational races, institutional representatives enumerated other goals their institutions ought to achieve. These goals did not only serve an aspirational function but reflected how these institutions wanted to be known. These included “quality in education and research”, “innovation and internationalisation”, “academic involvement with societal issues”, “focus on student needs”, “innovation, alumni, high quality and engagement in sustainable development and social responsibility”, “transparency and openness”, and “promotion of multilingualism”.

Students expressed a desire to have their universities more focused on students’ needs, to increase student involvement in research and the decision making processes, and the creation of a space of dialogue between students and faculty.

The reputation race has a strong influence on the decision making, the choice of activities and behavior of universities, but there is also a strong awareness both among students and institutional representatives that tertiary education institutions often do and should strive to achieve more important and more relevant goals.