

# Classification of Higher Education Institutions

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Guest Editors

This section presents a selection of the papers presented at the Second International Conference on Higher Education organized by the Ministry of Education through its Higher Education Division. The conference was held in Santiago, Chile on December 11, 2012 and brought together national and international experts in order to exchange views and lessons on different classification systems and their achievements.

As the number of students accessing higher education increases globally, the quantity of higher education institutions also grows and their offerings diversify. This development highlights the importance of historical classifications, as they become a way of systematizing information on institutional diversity that allows students to make decisions. At the same time, classifications can play a substantial role in the allocation of limited public resources in an environment of increasing competition, mobilizing and steering the actions of institutions in the direction of public priorities. These institutional classification systems, whether already existing or newly developed, face the challenge of reflecting and respecting the diversity of institutional missions and the heterogeneity of students who attend the various different types of higher education institutions.

In the international arena, two classification experiences stand out: the American experience with the Carnegie classification and the new European “U-Map” classification and the multidimensional ranking called “U-Multirank”. The Carnegie classification, probably the most important classification system in the United States, was developed independently in 1971 by a non-governmental organization with the goal of guiding research initiatives (McCormick article). While the Carnegie classification has undergone recent changes that have emphasized undergraduate teaching in institutions and made the classification more multidimensional, in its inception it was characterized by classifying institutions principally according to the highest academic degree they conferred.

In Europe, on the other hand, only recently has the higher education system grown in complexity, partly as a result of the Bologna Treaty (1999). The “U-Map,” started by the European Commission and developed by a consortium of institutions, is being adopted by many national governments (Ziegele article). The initiative characterizes institutions in six dimensions, each measured by multiple indicators.

While the Carnegie classification is an example of a priori classification, based on an intuition or conceptualization of the higher education system, the “U-Map” is an example of empirical classification which is developed based on information on the characteristics (similarities and differences) of institutions. In reality, both forms of articulation coexist and influence each other. A priori classifications affect the aspirations of institutions and encourage actions that bring them closer to their “ideal” group or category (Brint and McCormick articles). This is how the Carnegie classification, for example, has been influential not only in defining the identities of a number of institutions, but also their institutional aspirations. At the same time, institutions change over time, which calls for an update of the a priori classifications (Brunner article).

Both the Carnegie and “U-Map” classifications are examples of multidimensional classifications that permit the description of higher education institutions by taking into account both their different and complementary areas. The multidimensional classifications stand in opposition to rankings, which are special types of classifications in which numerous institutions are compared and arranged based only on limited dimensions. Rankings, criticized for overemphasizing quantitative indicators of academic activity, especially those that measure research (Salmi article), are also widely used by academics and decision-makers to measure and guide university performance. These actors, convinced of the role played by universities in knowledge-based economic development, have made decisions about institutional financing designed to foster “world class” institutions, defined as such by the current rankings.

The selection of articles in this special section provides an in-depth look at the most prominent international experiences with higher education institution classifications in the United States and Europe, a substantive discussion of the classification of higher education institutions in Chile, and an analysis of the challenges Chile faces in the development of world-class universities.

In the first article, Dr. McCormick discusses the main lessons to be learned from the higher education institution classification experience of the Carnegie Foundation in the United States, widely known as the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. In the article, Dr. McCormick examines the major challenges inherent to an institutional classification process via three questions: (1) Why should we classify? (2) How should we classify? (3) What are the unintended consequences and uses of higher education institution classification initiatives? Finally, the author gives recommendations for developing classifications.

In the second article, Dr. Ziegele describes the European experience of classifying institutions and the development of the multidimensional ranking of higher education institutions. Dr. Ziegele presents the concepts of horizontal diversity, vertical diversity and differentiation, and discusses efforts to increase transparency in the system through harmonization (including the transferable credit system and three-cycle degree system), quality assurance systems and institutional rankings. The author looks at the different objectives (European, national and institutional) that guide the development of tools and initiatives to increase transparency in higher education systems, and links them to mappings or typologies. The author also discusses common criticisms made of classification systems, looks at the “U-Map” case in Europe and links it with the multidimensional ranking initiative.

The third article contrasts a priori classification methods with classification systems based on real institutional characteristics and the available information on these characteristics. In this article, Dr. Brint describes research that he, along with other researchers, has carried out on groups of institutions in the U.S. and how an inductive classification based on empirical data can be effectively modified by a priori classifications. Dr. Brint also addresses the observed increase in the number of categories and dimensions in recent classification exercises and the growing importance of rankings. Finally, the author analyzes the proposed classification of higher education institutions developed by the Chilean Ministry of Education in light of his main conclusions about the North American experience.

Focusing on the national level, the author of the fourth article, José Joaquín Brunner, discusses how the major classification existing in Chile today (universities that belong to the Council of Rectors of Chilean Universities [CRUCH] versus universities not belonging to CRUCH) perpetuates the status quo in which only some institutions have access to government resources, based on historical criteria unrelated to quality, production of externalities or the characteristics of the student population they serve. Furthermore, Brunner provides recommendations for developing an institutional classification that offers more and better information for students’ decision-making process, in line with the recently developed “U-Map.” According to the author, the classification of institutions ought not to be used for purposes of financing or public policy. To achieve this objective, it is more appropriate, says Brunner, to use competitive financing instruments linked to objectives established by the authority.

In the last article, Dr. Salmi examines the decisions Chile faces in order to develop world-class universities. The development of this type of university, says the author, would allow Chile to compete more successfully in the international arena and better develop the high-level human capital that our country needs. The article places the Chilean higher education system within the international context in order to identify its strengths and weaknesses and to explore factors that may be limiting the performance of institutions, and universities in particular. Dr. Salmi offers recommendations for implementing a policy to support the development of world-class universities in Chile, while exploring the risks associated with this type of policy.

The articles in this special section are not only interesting in and of themselves, but also because they directly inform a discussion taking place in Chile about the current classification of higher education institutions and the aims that this classification should serve. The institutional classification currently used in Chile is very important because it is used by (1) students and parents in their decision-making and (2) the government in the allocation of public resources. These articles can positively contribute to the design of a classification that provides even more useful information for students in selecting their study programs, as well as for the government in its support and development policies for Chile’s higher education institutions.