

IREG Ranking Audit

Purpose, Criteria and Procedure

INTRODUCTION

Academic rankings are an entrenched phenomenon around the world and as such are recognized as source of information, transparency instrument as well as methods of quality assessment. There is also empirical evidence that rankings are influencing individual decisions, institutional and system-level policy-making areas. Consequently, those who produce and publish ranking are growingly aware that they put their reputation on the line in case they ranking tables are not free of material errors or they are not carried out with a due attention to basic deontological procedures. In this context important initiative was undertaken by ad-hoc expert group - the International Ranking Expert Group (IREG) which came up in May 2006 with a set of guidelines – the Berlin Principles on Ranking of Higher Education Institutions [in short “*Berlin Principles*” - see www.ireg-observatory.org].

In October 2009, on the basis of IREG was created the IREG Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence [in short “IREG Observatory”]. One of its main activities relates to collective understanding of the importance of quality assessment of its own domain of activities – rankings. The *IREG Ranking Audit* initiative is based on the Berlin Principles and is expected to:

- enhance the transparency about rankings;
- give users of rankings a tool to identify trustworthy rankings; and
- improve the quality of rankings.

Users of rankings (i.e. students and their parents, university leaders, academic staff, representatives of the corporate sectors, national and international policy makers) differ very much in their inside knowledge about higher education, universities and appropriate ranking methodologies. Particularly, the less informed groups (like prospective students) do not have a deep understanding of the usefulness and limitations of rankings, thus, an audit must be a valid and robust evaluation. This will offer a quality stamp which is easy to understand and in case of positive evaluation, rankings are entitled to use the quality label and corresponding logo - “**IREG approved**”.

I. STRUCTURE AND PROCEDURE

1. The ranking audit lies in the responsibility of the Executive Committee of the IREG Observatory [further on referred to as “the Executive Committee”]. The decision about approval of a ranking is made by the Executive Committee by simple majority of its members. Members of the Executive Committee do not participate in decisions about their own ranking. Decisions about approval are reported to the General Assembly of the IREG Observatory. A list of approved rankings is published on the IREG website www.ireg-observatory.org.
2. Audits will be carried out by Audit Teams consisting of three to five members. Members are nominated by the Executive Committee. The chairs of Audit Teams are not formally associated with an organisation that is doing rankings. At least one member of an audit team has to be a member of the Executive Committee.
3. The Audit Team prepares a written report which is submitted directly to the Executive Committee.
4. Eligible for the audit are rankings in the field of higher education and research that have been published at least twice within the last four years. If a ranking organisation produces several rankings based on the same basic methodology they can be audited in one audit review.
5. The level of audit fee is set by the decision of the Executive Committee.
6. Rankings audited positively are entitled to use the label “IREG approved”. The label and the audit decision will be valid for three years in first audits, for five years in follow-up audits.

PROCEDURE

1. *Information of ranking*

Ranking organisations who apply for IREG Ranking Audit will be informed about the audit procedure and the criteria.
2. *Self-report*

In a first step the audited ranking produces a report based on a questionnaire including basic information about the ranking [see Part III – *Fact Sheet*] and the criteria set for auditing [see Part II – *Criteria*]. The self-report has to be delivered within 2 months.
3. *Interaction between the Audit Team and ranking organisation*
 - a. The Audit Team will react on the self-report within 6 weeks by written questions and comments; it can require additional information and/or materials.
 - b. The ranking organisation has to answer to the additional questions within 5-6 weeks.
 - c. An on-site visit at the ranking organisation is possible upon invitation by the ranking organisation, preferably after the additional questions have been sent to the ranking organisation.

4. *Audit Report*

- a. Based on the self-report and the interaction between the Audit Team and ranking organisation, the team drafts an audit report within 6 weeks after the completion of the Audit Team – ranking organization interaction. The Audit Report includes:
 - a description of the ranking (based on information provided in the Fact Sheet - see Appendix),
 - an evaluation of the ranking based on the IREG audit criteria, and
 - a suggestion on the audit decision (yes/no).
- b. The Audit Report is sent to the ranking organisation which can formulate a statement on the report within three weeks.
- c. The Audit Report is submitted to the Executive Committee. The Executive Committee is testifying that the report applies the criteria for ranking audit.

5. *Decision by the Executive Committee*

The Executive Commission decides about the approval of the ranking on the basis of the Audit Report delivered by the audit team and the statement on the Audit Report submitted by the audited ranking. Decision is made by simple majority of the members of the Executive Committee.

6. *Publication*

The audit decision and a summary report are published on the website of the IREG Observatory. *Only positive audit decisions will be made public.* The detailed report can be made public by agreement between IREG Observatory and the audited ranking organization. The audit will not produce a ranking of rankings and hence the audit scores will not be published.

II. CRITERIA

PURPOSE, TARGET GROUPS, BASIC APPROACH

Rankings are only one of a number of diverse approaches to the assessment of higher education inputs, processes, and outputs (see *Berlin Principles*, 1). This should be communicated by rankings.

Criterion 1: The purpose of the ranking and the (main) target groups should be made explicit. The ranking has to demonstrate that it is designed with due regard to its purpose (see *Berlin Principles*, 2). This includes a model of indicators that refers to the purpose of the ranking.

Criterion 2: Rankings should recognize the diversity of institutions and take the different missions and goals of institutions into account. Quality measures for research-oriented institutions, for example, are quite different from those that are appropriate for institutions that provide broad access to underserved communities (see *Berlin Principles*, 3). The ranking has to be explicit about the type/profile of institutions which are included and those who are not.

Criterion 3: Rankings should specify the linguistic, cultural, economic, and historical contexts of the educational systems being ranked. International rankings in particular should be aware of possible biases and be precise about their objectives and data (see *Berlin Principles*, 5).

International rankings should adopt indicators with sufficient comparability across relevant nations.

METHODOLOGY

Criterion 4: Rankings should choose indicators according to their relevance and validity. The choice of data should be grounded in recognition of the ability of each measure to represent quality and academic and institutional strengths, and not availability of data. Rankings should be clear about why measures were included and what they are meant to represent (see *Berlin Principles*, 7).

Criterion 5: The concept of quality of higher education institutions is multidimensional and multi-perspective and “quality lies in the eye of the beholder”. Good ranking practice would be to combine the different perspectives provided by those sources in order to get a more complete view of each higher education institution included in the ranking. *Rankings have to avoid presenting data that reflect only one particular perspective on higher education institutions (e.g. employers only, students only)*. If a ranking refers to one perspective/one data source only this limitation has to be made explicit.

Criterion 6: Rankings should measure outcomes in preference to inputs whenever possible. Data on inputs and processes are relevant as they reflect the general condition of a given establishment and are more frequently available. Measures of outcomes provide a more accurate assessment of the standing and/or quality of a given institution or program, and compilers of rankings should ensure that an appropriate balance is achieved (see *Berlin Principles*, 8).

Criterion 7: Rankings have to be transparent regarding the methodology used for creating the rankings. The choice of methods used to prepare rankings should be clear and unambiguous (see *Berlin Principles*, 6). It should also be indicated who establishes the methodology and if it is externally evaluated.

Ranking must provide clear definitions and operationalizations for each indicator as well as the underlying data sources and the calculation of indicators from raw data. The methodology has to be publicly available to all users of the ranking as long as the ranking results are open to public. In particular methods of normalizing and standardizing indicators have to be explained with regard to their impact on raw indicators.

Criterion 8: If ranking are using *composite indicators* the weights of the individual indicators have to be published. Changes in weights over time should be limited and have to be due to methodological or conceptual considerations.

Institutional rankings have to make clear the methods of aggregating results for a whole institution. Institutional rankings should try to control for effects of different field structures (e.g. specialized vs. comprehensive universities) in their aggregate result (see *Berlin Principles*, 6)

Criterion 9: Data used in the ranking must be obtained from authorized, audited and verifiable data sources and/or collected with proper procedures for professional data collection following the rules of empirical research (see *Berlin Principles*, 11 and 12). Procedures of data collection have to be made transparent, in particular with regard to survey data.

Information on survey data has to include: source of data, method of data collection, response rates, and structure of the samples (such as geographical and/or occupational structure).

Criterion 10: Although rankings have to adapt to changes in higher education and should try to enhance their methods, the basic methodology should be kept stable as much as possible. Changes in methodology should be based on methodological arguments and not be used as a means to produce different results than in previous years. Changes in methodology should be made transparent (see *Berlin Principles*, 9).

PUBLICATION AND PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

Rankings should provide users with a clear understanding of all of the factors used to develop a ranking, and offer them a choice in how rankings are displayed. This way, the users of rankings would have a better understanding of the indicators that are used to rank institutions or programs (see *Berlin Principles*, 15).

Criterion 11: The publication of a ranking has to be made available to users throughout the year either by print publications and/or by an online version of the ranking.

Criterion 12: The publication has to deliver a description of the methods and indicators used in the ranking. That information should take into account the knowledge of the main target groups of the ranking.

Criterion 13: The publication of the ranking must provide scores of each individual indicator used to calculate a composite indicator in order to allow users to verify the calculation of ranking results. Composite indicators may not refer to indicators that are not published.

Criterion 14: Rankings should allow users to have some opportunity to make their own decisions about the relevance and weights of indicators (see *Berlin Principles*, 15).

TRANSPARENCY, RESPONSIVENESS

Accumulated experience with regard to degree of confidence and “popularity” of a given ranking demonstrates that greater transparency means higher credibility of a given ranking.

Criterion 15: Rankings should be compiled in a way that eliminates or reduces errors caused by the ranking and be organized and published in a way that errors and faults caused by the ranking can be corrected (see *Berlin Principles*, 16). This implies that such errors should be corrected within a ranking period at least in an online publication of the ranking.

Criterion 16: Rankings have to be responsive to higher education institutions included/participating in the ranking. This involves giving explanations on methods and indicators as well as explanation of results of individual institutions.

Criterion 17: Rankings have to provide a contact address in their publication (print, online version) to which users and institutions ranked can direct questions about the methodology, feedback on errors and general comments. They have to demonstrate that they respond to questions from users.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

- Criterion 18: Rankings have to apply measures of quality assurance to ranking processes themselves. These processes should take note of the expertise that is being applied to evaluate institutions and use this knowledge to evaluate the ranking itself (see *Berlin Principles*, 13).
- Criterion 19: Rankings have to document the internal processes of quality assurance. This documentation has to refer to processes of organising the ranking and data collection as well as to the quality of data and indicators.
- Criterion 20: Rankings should apply organisational measures that enhance the credibility of rankings. These measures could include advisory or even supervisory bodies, preferably (in particular for international rankings) with some international participation (see *Berlin Principles*, 14).

ASSESSMENT OF CRITERIA

Criteria are assessed with numerical scores. In the audit process the score for each criterion is graded by the review teams according to the degree of fulfilment of that criterion. The audit will apply a scale from 1 to 6:

Not sufficient	1
Marginally applied	2
Adequate	3
Good	4
Strong	5
Distinguished	6

Criteria will be divided into core criteria with a weight of two and regular criteria with a weight of 1 (see below table - *Weights of Audit Criteria*). Hence the maximum score for each core criteria will be 12, for regular criteria 6. Based on the attribution of criteria (with 10 core and 10 regular criteria) the total maximum score will be 180.

On the bases of the assessment scale described above, the threshold for a positive audit decision will be 50 % of the maximum total score. This means the average score on the criteria has to be “adequate”. Audit can be with conditions if there are deficits with regard to core criteria. Rankings assessed from 40 % to 50% can be audited with additional conditions/requirements that have to be fulfilled within one year after audit decision.

Weights of Audit Criteria

	Criterion	Weight
PURPOSE, TARGET GROUPS, BASIC APPROACH		
1	The purpose of the ranking and the (main) target groups should be made explicit	2
2	Rankings should recognize the diversity of institutions	2
3	Rankings should specify the linguistic, cultural, economic, and historical contexts of the educational systems being ranked.	1
METHODOLOGY		
4	Rankings should choose indicators according to their relevance and validity.	2
5	The concept of quality of higher education institutions is multidimensional and multi-perspective (...). Good ranking practice would be to combine the different perspectives	1
6	Rankings should measure outcomes in preference to inputs whenever possible	1
7	Rankings have to be transparent regarding the methodology used for creating the rankings.	2
8	If ranking are using <i>composite indicators</i> the weights of the individual indicators have to be published. Changes in weights over time should be limited and due to methodological or conceptual considerations	2
9	Data used in the ranking must be obtained from authorized, audited and verifiable data sources and/or collected with proper procedures for professional data collection	2
10	The basic methodology should be kept stable as much as possible.	1
PUBLICATION AND PRESENTATION OF RESULTS		
11	The publication of a ranking has to be made available to users throughout the year either by print publications and/or by an online version of the ranking	1
12	The publication has to deliver a description of the methods and indicators used in the ranking.	1
13	The publication of the ranking must provide scores of each individual indicator used to calculate a composite indicator in order to allow users to verify the calculation of ranking results.	2
14	Rankings should allow users to have some opportunity to make their own decisions about the relevance and weights of indicators	1
TRANSPARENCY, RESPONSIVENESS		
15	Rankings should be compiled in a way that eliminates or reduces errors	1

	Criterion	Weight
16	Rankings have to be responsive to higher education institutions included/ participating in the ranking	2
17	Rankings have to provide a contact address in their publication (print, online version)	1
QUALITY ASSURANCE		
18	Rankings have to apply measures of quality assurance to ranking processes themselves.	2
19	Rankings have to document the internal processes of quality assurance	1
20	Rankings should apply organisational measures that enhance the credibility of rankings	2
MAXIMUM TOTAL SCORE (WITH 6 GRADE SCALE OF ASSESSMENT)		180

III. FACT SHEET

0. *Name of the ranking*
1. *Information on the ranking organization*
 - 1.1. Name and address
 - 1.2. Type (academic – non-academic, public – private, for-profit – non-profit)
 - 1.3. Financing model/sources of the ranking
 - 1.4. Contact person
2. *Information on previous record of the ranking activity*
 - 2.1. Date of first publication and brief history
 - 2.2. Publication frequency
 - 2.3. Date of the latest two publications
3. *Purpose and main target groups of the ranking*
 - 3.1. Purpose
 - 3.2. Main target groups /users
4. *Scope of the ranking*
 - 4.1. Geographical scope (global, international (e.g. European, national etc.)
 - 4.2. Types of institutions, number of institutions ranked, number of institutions published
 - 4.3. Level of comparison (e.g. institutional, subject based, etc.)
5. *Methodology of the ranking*
 - 5.1. General approach, options include overall composite score through setting fixed weights to different indicators, separate indicators which allows customized rankings, other aggregation methods
 - 5.2. Measured dimensions (research, teaching & learning, third mission etc.)
 - 5.3. Indicators (relevance, definitions, weights etc.)
 - 5.4. Data source, options include third-party database (data was not provided by universities), data collected from universities by third-party agencies, data collected from universities by ranking organizations (or their representative), survey of university staff or students by ranking organizations with collaboration of the universities, survey conducted by ranking organizations exclusively, etc.
 - 5.5. Transparency of methodology
 - 5.6. Display of ranking results (league tables, groups or clusters, mixed way)
6. *Quality assurance of the ranking*
 - 6.1. Quality assurance on data collection and process
 - 6.2. Organisational measures for quality assurance (consultants, boards etc.)
7. *Publication and use of the ranking*
 - 7.1. Type of publication (print, online or both)
 - 7.2. Language of publication (primary language, other available language)
 - 7.3. Access for users of the rankings (registration, fees)
8. *Impact of the ranking*
 - 8.1. Impact on personal level (students, parents, researchers etc.)
 - 8.2. Impact on institutional level (higher education institution as a whole, rectors and presidents, deans, students, administration, etc.)

8.3. Impact on the higher education system