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# How rankings produce competition

## The case of global university rankings

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### Abstract

It is often assumed that rankings produce or intensify competition, while the way they do this remains largely obscure. We address this problem by analyzing global university rankings. Drawing from a sociological understanding of competition, we propose a concept of rankings as a type of social operation that combines four sub-operations: comparison of performances, quantification, visualization and repeated publication. We particularly emphasize visualization and publication to highlight the often-neglected performative dimension of rankings. We then develop an explanation of how rankings construct competition between universities, highlighting the following three effects thereof: (a) globalization of a specific discourse on university excellence; (b) “scarcification” of reputation for excellence; and (c) regular publication of findings, effectively transforming a stable status order into a dynamic competitive field. In this process, competition for status is being converted from something implicit and inherently local into something explicit and globally acknowledged. We conclude by discussing general conceptual implications of this analysis for the study of the construction and societal impact of competition.

**Keywords:** competition, rankings, universities, globalization, global fields

# Wie Rankings Konkurrenz produzieren

## Am Beispiel globaler Universitätsrankings

### Zusammenfassung

Der Zusammenhang zwischen Rankings und Konkurrenz wird häufig unterstellt, aber selten genauer untersucht. Der vorliegende Aufsatz geht ihm am Beispiel globaler Universitätsrankings nach. Ausgehend von einem soziologischen Verständnis von Konkurrenz bestimmen wir „Ranken“ als eine soziale Operation, die vier Teiloperationen miteinander kombiniert: Vergleich von Leistungen, Quantifizierung, Visualisierung, und wiederholte Publikation. Visualisierung und Publikation stehen für die in der Literatur bisher kaum berücksichtigte performative Dimension von Rankings, die für die Analyse des Zusammenhangs zwischen Rankings und Konkurrenz von zentraler Bedeutung ist. Auf dieser Grundlage zeigen wir, wie globale Universitätsrankings zur Konstruktion von Konkurrenz beitragen: durch (a) Globalisierung eines spezifischen Exzellenzdiskurses; (b) Verknappung von Reputation; (c) Transformation einer stabilen in eine dynamische Statusordnung. Wir schließen mit einer Diskussion von Implikationen dieser Analyse für die soziologische Erforschung von Konkurrenz und ihrer gesellschaftlichen Effekte.

**Schlagwörter:** Konkurrenz, Rankings, Universitäten, Globalisierung, globale Felder

# 1 Introduction

It is often argued that we live in an era of increasing competition (Rosa 2006; Schimank & Volkmann 2017), whereby rankings are almost routinely recognized as an important driver of this process (Corley & Gioia 2000; Espeland & Sauder 2016a; Marginson & van der Wende 2007; Mau 2017). Such views often assume an almost linear relationship between rankings and organizational behavior. We challenge this assumption by drawing attention to the distinction between, on the one hand, the public production of competition by rankings and, on the other, its possible effects on organizational competitive behavior. We specifically ask: How *exactly* do rankings produce competition? How can these insights inform the discussion about the “competition society” that we supposedly live in? And, finally, how can they guide empirical investigations on the effects of rankings on organizations?

The present article addresses these questions by using the example of global university rankings. In many ways, universities are today less thought of as nationally or locally rooted institutions, tightly connected to specific traditions and histories, but more as empowered organizational actors in a globalized academic world (Krücken & Meier 2006). This development is often attributed to globalization, the rise of neoliberalism and new public management, reduced financial support from the state, heightened demands by stakeholders such as (prospective) students and alumni – but also to the proliferation of rankings, first developed in national contexts (Myers & Robe 2009) and, since the early 2000s, on a global level (Paradeise & Thoenig 2013).

Rankings, of course, play an important role in other fields as well. Nation-states, athletes, hospitals, restaurants, accounting firms or cities: there is almost no limit as to what kind of social entity can be made subject of a league table. However, university rankings have attracted comparatively more scholarly attention. This interest may be little surprising given that social scientists work at universities themselves and thus may be especially affected by this particular kind of rankings. Be it for this or for other reasons, the interest in university rankings has found itself at the center of research on rankings in the social sciences (de Rijcke et al. 2016; e.g. Espeland & Sauder 2016b; Hazelkorn 2016; Paradeise & Thoenig 2013; Rindova et al. 2017).

As we shall see, however, these studies have largely been concerned with the effects of rankings on universities or policy makers, while largely taking for granted that rankings produce and intensify competition. By contrast, we argue that an adequate understanding of the effects of rankings can only be developed *after* conceptualizing the distinct social processes underlying the creation of competition. In our view, then, the current state of research calls for a new sociological perspective on rankings that clarifies the relationship between rankings and the social construction of competition.

Our paper develops such a perspective, which is empirically informed by a closer look at global university rankings. We present our argument in three steps. In the first two sections, we lay down our conceptual view of the relationship between rankings and competition, whereby we argue that rankings are involved in the construction of a particular type of competition: competition for the favor of an imagined public. To conceptualize this type of competition, we combine Georg Simmel's classical ideas on competition – competition as a struggle for the favor of third parties – with more recent studies on publics as discursive constructions. Based on these insights, we describe this type of competition as *a social process* where two different kinds of third parties – public observers (or intermediaries, arbiters) and their imagined public (or audiences) – collaborate in the social construction of competition.

The second section builds on this model to conceptualize the role of rankings in this process. In the light of our model, we define rankings as a type of social operation that combines four sub-operations: comparison of performances, quantification, visualization and publication. We particularly highlight what we call the *performative* dimension of rankings: the fact that they have to be published on a continual basis. As a consequence, we see rankings not just as another means of evaluation-by-numbers but as a social process that creates competition by means of repeated publication and repeated addressing of imagined publics. According to this definition, then, repeated publication and imagined publics are constitutive elements of rankings. This understanding not only clarifies the relationship between rankings and competition, but it also helps to distinguish rankings from similar but different phenomena such as ratings.

In the third section, we illustrate these insights empirically by looking into how global university rankings set and shape the institutional framing of status competition between universities.

The main empirical argument of the paper is that global university rankings affect the global university field in three distinct but interrelated ways: (a) by establishing a universal framework of comparison, global rankings urge universities to see themselves as actors in a global, rather than just in regional or national field; (b) by evaluating performances comparatively and quantitatively, they “scarcify” reputation; and (c) by regular publication, they transform stable status orders into dynamic competitive fields. Empirically,<sup>1</sup> we primarily draw from the three major global university rankings – Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU, a.k.a. Shanghai Rankings),<sup>2</sup> *Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings*<sup>3</sup> and QS World University Rankings.<sup>4</sup>

Our analysis has several general implications for the broader debates on the increasing influence of competition in contemporary society. Given that the production of competition through rankings is based (only) on continual public comparison and imagined publics, our analysis has two major implications. First, the increasing number of rankings implies that there is indeed a proliferation of performance comparisons that are effective in producing the *suggestion* of competition in various fields, ranging from sports to the arts, from nation-states to universities.

Second, however, this does *not* necessarily imply intensified competition in all of these fields, because competition for the favor of an imagined public – the type of competition produced by rankings – has a fictitious, almost airy quality to it. In this kind of competition, competitors and their audiences are only *indirectly* connected through the public suggestion of competition. They cannot directly observe the actual behavior of their competitors and their audiences. This constitutive uncertainty points to the possibility and indeed likelihood

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<sup>1</sup> The empirical material presented in this article was collected in June 2017.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.shanghairanking.com/index.html>, retrieved on 10 June 2017.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2017/world-ranking>, retrieved on 10 June 2017.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2018>, retrieved on 10 June 2017.

of *decoupling* between the social construction of competition, on the one hand, and the actual intensity of the competition, on the other.

This is also reflected in the current state of research in the rankings literature, which suggests that in most cases we do not know much about the actual reactions of ranked individuals and organizations, including, most notably, the possibility of ignoring or resisting the competitive pressure produced by rankings (Rindova et al. 2017). The literature also tends to over-generalize the scant knowledge we have about some untypical cases (such as rankings of American law schools). Observing the public construction of competition through rankings and similar devices should thus not lead to the immediate conclusion that we live in an era of intensified competition. Rather, our analysis suggests that we live in an era of increasing *imagined* competition both in social reality and in the social sciences – the actual effects of which are largely unknown and await further research. These implications are further elaborated in the concluding section

## **2 Constructing competition for an imagined audience: conceptual remarks**

In everyday language and much of the social science literature, competition is usually seen as a result of overlapping intentions of (at least) two competitors. In terms of formal sociology, this is a *dyadic* understanding of competition: it requires only two participants struggling for the same scarce good. This understanding captures a number of important phenomena, such as countries claiming the same territory, athletes trying to win a contest, etc.

The competition constructed by rankings is, however, closer to a more specific definition of competition suggested by Georg Simmel (1903, 1950). Simmel's aim was to develop a clearer-than-usual distinction between competition and other forms of struggle. For that purpose, he conceived of what he called the pure form of competition as the case where (at least) two competitors struggle for the scarce favor of (at least) a third party. In formal terms, this is a *triadic* constellation, as it requires the participation of, and interaction between, at least three parties. Most notably, it requires a third party observing and evaluating the competitors' offers in order to distribute its favor among them. A simple example for the

Simmelian type of competition would be rivals-for-love trying to win the favor of the same loved-one.

Simmel's view is unique in social sciences in that it sees modern competition not just as a procedure to discipline and motivate competitors (as liberal political economy since Adam Smith has it) but also as a procedure *to sensitize them to the needs and interests of third parties, particularly a common audience*. In Simmel's own words: "Antagonistic tension with his competitor sharpens the businessman's sensitivity to the tendencies of the public, even to the point of clairvoyance, in respect to future changes in the public's taste, fashions, interests – not only the businessman's, but also the journalist's, artist's, bookseller's, parliamentarian's. Modern competition is described as the fight of all against all, but at the same time it is the fight of all for all." (Simmel 1955: 62)

This concept of competition is helpful for the analysis of rankings, too, as it allows seeing them as tools used by third parties to construct competition. However, it has to be specified to capture the social process through which rankings affect competition. Inasmuch as rankings affect competition, they do so by publicly comparing and evaluating performances and by addressing an audience/public that is imagined as being interested in the competitors' products or performances. They thus take part in the construction of a particular type of competition that we call competition for the favor of an imagined public/audience (cf. Werron 2014, 2015).

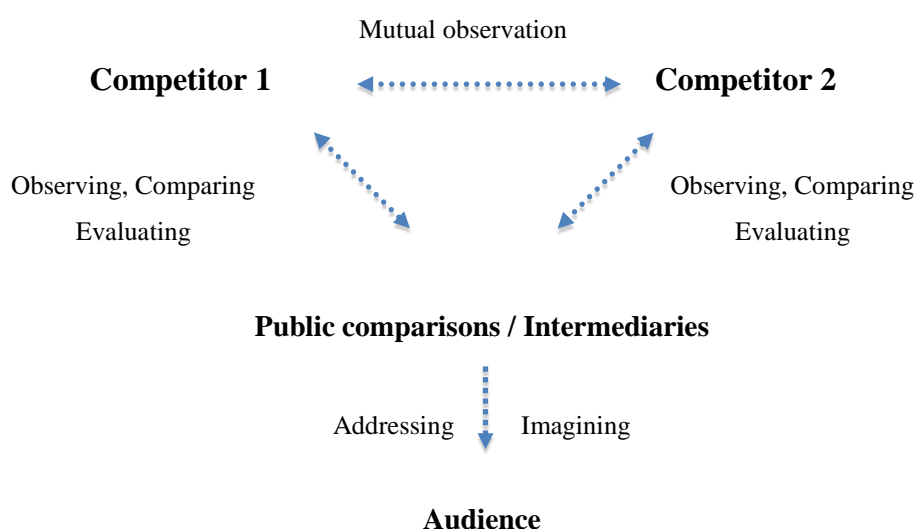
The role of the public, or audience, in the production of this type of competition requires some additional conceptual remarks. Public, or audience, here does not refer to a real group of people but to a *discursive construct* that emerges in mutual relationship with public discourse (which, of course, does not mean that rankings are not *also* observed and consumed by real people). This points to a chicken-and-egg relationship between public discourse and imagined public that is essential to the understanding of modern publics, the emergence of which can be traced back to the mid-to-late 18<sup>th</sup> century: public discourse is possible only by addressing an imagined public, just as imagined publics are possible only by being addressed in public discourse (Warner 2002).

Therefore, the social construction of competition for the favor of a public/audience requires the existence of and, in a sense, collaboration between two different kinds of third parties: (1) intermediate third parties publicly comparing and evaluating performances; and (2)

publics/audiences addressed by these intermediate third parties. In a sense, the competitive process revolves around publics/audiences, as the favor of the public/audience is the ultimate target of the competition. At the same time, however, the public/audience remains largely fictitious, or notional, in character: a “hidden third party” (Werron 2016), that cannot articulate its preferences directly, but requires representation by other third parties – intermediaries. Figure 1 illustrates these relationships.

In this conceptualization of competition, the public/audience also represents the scarce good of this particular type of competition: the imagined favor that decides about winning or losing. The attention of the audience is the basic good, on the basis of which further goods, like legitimacy or reputation (status, prestige), can be constructed and distributed (cf. Werron 2014).

**Figure 1. Competition for the favor of an audience** (Werron 2015)



In the resulting type of competition, the competition is produced by third parties – from government officials to political journalists to market analysts to art critics – by publicly comparing and evaluating performances while addressing and imagining an audience supposedly interested in these performances. Competition in these terms is not just an outcome of intentions directed at the same goods. It is the product of *repeated public comparisons* of performances. This definition draws attention to neglected aspects of the social production of competition: to the constitutive role of third parties; to relationships between these third parties and their imagined audiences; to the production of the favor of



audiences as a scarce good; and to the temporality of the competitive process as produced by these third parties and their imagined audiences.

### **3 Rankings as a social process**

In spite of a growing body of literature on rankings, particularly university rankings, there is no concept of rankings in the literature that helps make sense of the complex relationship between rankings, competition, and third parties. Martins (2005: 702), for instance, offers a definition in which rankings are conceived of as “(p)ublicly available comparative orderings of organizations, based on evaluation criteria determined by a ranking organization.” Neither does this definition clarify the specific type of comparative ordering rankings produce, nor does it conceptualize the role of audiences. Webster (1986: 5) argues that in order to designate a performance measurement, a ranking “must be arranged according to some criterion or set of criteria which the complier(s) of the list believed measured or reflected academic quality.” Again, there is no further elaboration of the type of arrangement or ordering produced by rankings.

It is thus little surprising that studies rarely attempt to distinguish rankings precisely from other types of performance measurement instruments, particularly ratings (Kelley & Simmons 2014; Meredith 2004; Rindova et al. 2017), thus largely relying on implicit understandings of the phenomenon. When rankings are defined, it remains unclear what the distinguishing characteristics of rankings and their audiences are or if and how they are related to (the construction of) competition. In this regard, Sauder (2006) and Sauder, Lynn and Podolny (2012) stand out. In contrast to the majority of research on rankings, they recognize third parties and their role in the emergence of competition between the organizations that are subject to rankings. However, they consider the audiences addressed by third parties as a group of real people, which becomes apparent in many formulations. For instance, according to Sauder and colleagues (2012: 272, 278), audiences can “perceive” and “view” with the help of rankings.

The concept of third parties that we outlined in the previous section suggests that there is no way to directly examine audiences and how they “perceive,” which is why we call for focusing on how third parties publicly construct the properties, needs, and preferences of

audiences, and on the impact these have on the construction of competition. Our conceptualization of rankings is thus unique in that we (a) distinguish rankings from other forms of performance measurement, (b) sensitize researchers for the social construction of audiences, and (c) use the Simmelian model introduced in the previous section to clarify the relation between competition and rankings. In a nutshell, we suggest viewing rankings as *a type of social operation that takes part in the continuous construction of competition for the favor of an imagined public/audience*. They do so by combining and integrating four sub-operations (Werron & Ringel 2017): zero-sum comparison of performances, quantification, visualization and repeated (regular, periodic) publication.

(1) The first sub-operation is the *comparison of performances*. This features (a) comparability of entities pertaining to the same category and (b) differentiation between the entities of the said category according to certain criteria of performance (Bühler & Heintz 2017; Heintz 2010, 2016). This step is crucial in that it helps the observer to systematically denaturalize basic assumptions deeply engrained in the practices of everyday life. For instance, it is not natural – in the true sense of the word – to conceive apples and oranges as being part of the same category of “fruit.” Rather, the category “fruit” is a social product enacted and thus created in the act of comparing two objects by using the *tertia comparationis* “fruit.”

Applied to our empirical case, different social entities are first labeled organizations, then being declared comparable because they belong to the category “university,” and finally evaluated according to the same criteria of performance which are applied to all members of the category (such as “quality of research” or “excellence in teaching”).<sup>5</sup> Research on rankings is often oblivious to the complexities and intricacies of the social process of producing comparisons, as it tends to accept the taken-for-grantedness of categories such as “excellence.”

Moreover, rankings are not merely comparisons; they are *zero-sum comparisons*. “Zero-sum” denotes a specific kind of comparison that assumes that a quality ascribed to some compared entity by implication cannot simultaneously be ascribed to another compared

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<sup>5</sup> This aspect of rankings bears resemblance to Espeland and Stevens’ (1998) concept of commensuration. However, we wish to distinguish between making entities comparable and quantifying them and thus suggest distinguishing between commensuration and quantification.

entity. In these cases, the “sum” of possibilities created by the assumption of comparability is transformed into a dependent relationship between the compared entities. In the case of university rankings: however close the actual scores are, the precision of quantified indicators usually implies that only one university can be at the top of the ranking – at the expense of all other universities. Only rarely do several universities share the same rank, and if they do, it is likely to be different the next time around. This issue, especially the social production of “zero-sum,” is rarely theorized in the literature on rankings, which, as we mentioned earlier, often does not distinguish between different modes of performance comparisons.

(2) *Quantification.* Zero-sum comparisons are not necessarily of a quantitative kind. Arguing that Oxford is the best university in the world is indeed a matter of a zero-sum comparison in that it implies that all other universities – for whatever reason – are *not* the best. This argument can be made in exclusively narrative, or qualitative terms. However, there are certain limitations to such zero-sum comparisons, especially when it involves the comparison of a large number of entities. Someone arguing that, for example, Yale is better than Oxford would have to elaborate how they came to such conclusion – tradition, the quality of a specific department, the debate culture, etc. The proponent of Oxford might have just as many good reasons as does the champion of Yale. In the case of a multi-university comparison, both would have to follow elaborate lines of argumentation to not only to convince the other person that Oxford/Yale is the best university but also that all others are not. As a result, narrative zero-sum comparisons can quickly lead to contentious debates.

Against this backdrop, the distinct appeal of *numbers as a rhetorical means of comparison* becomes clear: by attaching numbers to qualities, rankers can validate their zero-sum statements in unambiguous terms. After all, Oxford is not just “more international” than, for example, the California Institute of Technology, but it has a student body that is exactly 35% international, while the latter’s only 27%. Seen in this light and given that an international student body is something to be desired, Oxford is “of course” ranked higher than the California Institute of Technology. Sociologically speaking, it is important at this juncture to take notice of the communicative quality that quantification adds to zero-sum statements. While the critics of rankings typically see quantification as simplification, we join other scholars (e.g. Espeland & Sauder 2007) who argue that this “reductive” aspect plays an important role in making rankings such a successful means of public comparison.

However, for rankings to achieve their well-known distinctive allure, *both* zero-sum comparison and quantification are necessary. Taken alone, the comparison of performances in qualitative or narrative terms has a limited scope and can be easily called into question. Quantification in itself, on the other hand, lacks the excitement triggered by zero-sum comparisons: “The general effects of quantification seem more inchoate, varied and inconsistent than the particular power of rankings” (Healy 2017: 516).

Healy (2017) further explains that rankings, in order to be effective, need to provide “a link between experts and their audiences that is both *coercive and seductive* [emphasis added].” We agree with this insight and argue that next to the informative dimension of rankings, which is the combination of zero-sum comparisons and quantification, we need to recognize their *performative* dimension. In our concept of rankings, we distinguish between two performative aspects, visualization and publication, both of which have hitherto not been theorized by research on rankings as factors that need to be accounted for.

(3) *Visualizing quantified zero-sum performances* allows ranking organizations to present a range of comparable entities and the differences between these comparable entities in one and the same image. It matches the clarity and simplicity of quantified comparisons with a similarly clear and simple visual order that facilitates the diffusion of and public communication about the performances measured by rankings. Rankings thus usually establish what Latour (1987) calls “centres of calculation” which collect and interpret all available information and present it to an audience. Visualization does not merely encode information, but fundamentally transforms it (Hansen & Flyverbom 2015), implying that visualizations should be taken seriously as social phenomena in their own right and not merely be observed with regard to how “accurately” they represent information. Visualizations are then part and parcel of the seductiveness and coerciveness of rankings in that they offer audiences and ranked organizations alike a picture of reality that they can easily understand and comment on.

The most common device used for this purpose is a table. A table produces a clear overview of comparable entities which are arranged hierarchically according to differences in performance. The three major global university rankings – ARWU, *THE* and QS rankings – use some kind of table to present their findings to the public. In addition to the one table with the overall ranking of universities, they also rank universities according to some specific

criteria, all of which feature a single table listing universities according to their rank. Moreover, the tables published on websites have evolved over time to allow more interactivity and customized service. Thus, visitors can choose among several criteria and arrive at different rankings. U-Multirank,<sup>6</sup> whose creators argue that there is no such thing as a single global university ranking, is, for example, entirely based on this approach. Yet this ranking too uses a table as its main visualization device. As these examples demonstrate, in order to fully account for the production of competition by means of rankings, a careful analysis of their visual presentation is vital.

(4) *Publication*. While zero-sum comparison, quantification and visualization are necessary to establish rankings as a distinct type of social operation, they do not suffice to produce the imagination of competition for the favor of an audience described in the last section. Rankings are transformed into a mechanism of competition only in the repeated act of *publication*. By being published repeatedly, rankings create a situation in which the ranked entities are being constantly observed *for* an audience, whose appreciation is imagined as a scarce good that can be competed for.

As already emphasized, an audience, or public, in these terms is not a sum of concrete people with motives but a social construct created in the process of publication; vice versa, public discourse – as a series of specific speech acts – is only possible by addressing and imagining a public. A crucial element of the effective institutionalization of rankings in a field is thus that they are not published once or twice but *continually*, an aspect neglected by research on third parties and rankings (see, for instance, Sauder 2006). To effectively manufacture the imagination of ongoing competition, the same set of actors has to be related in zero-sum, quantified, and visualized public comparisons regularly.

The temporal aspects of repeated publication are an essential feature that distinguishes the global rankings of today from their predecessors. Historically speaking, early experiments with the comparative evaluation of universities typically involved an individual publishing one, sometimes two ranking tables. The rankings introduced by James McKeen Cattell, a long-time editor of the journal *Science*, from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century are good examples. Rather than comparing universities repeatedly, he sought to document a stable state by, for

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<sup>6</sup> <http://umultirank.org>, retrieved on 10 June 2017.

instance, using the place of study of the so-called “great men” as a token for the quality of a university (Myers & Robe 2009). In contrast, contemporary university rankings are published regularly by organizations, predominantly use updated information (e.g. latest surveys, updated publication and citation lists) and in doing so help create a continually shifting environment for universities. In other words, the ongoing publication of the same ranking (annually, biennially, etc.) allows for year-to-year comparisons and thus keeps the conversation going and the imagined public of university rankings in existence.

To sum up: the regular publication of visualized and quantified zero-sum comparisons in different societal fields produces status competition between the ranked entities (Table 1).

**Table 1. How rankings produce competition**

Four rankings sub-operations			
Informative dimension		Performative dimension	
Comparison of performances	Quantification	Visualization	Publication



***Status competition***

By including the performative dimension into our analytical framework and particularly by highlighting the “publicness” of continually published rankings, we add to the debate a conceptualization of rankings as an engine that produces social situations of competition. Note that by emphasizing the discursive construction of competition, our model departs from the common assumption that competition arises from psychological preferences of actors targeted at the same good. As a result, our model offers the analytical means to distinguish between the public construction of competition, on the one hand, and organizational responses, on the other: organizations might very well be aligned with the competition suggested by third party rankings, but everyday practices might also be decoupled or loosely coupled. If and how closely actors’ intentions and practices actually align with the competition constructed by third parties then becomes an empirical question.

The specificity of rankings and their role in the production of competition becomes clearer when compared to other types of performance measurement such as ratings or benchmarks. While such instruments contain some of the four elements – zero-sum comparison, quantification, visualization, and publication – only rankings combine all of them. Ratings,

for instance, are often based on quantifications and allow for the comparison of performances (on ratings cf. Kette 2018). But they do not include all rated actors in repeatedly published tables, and therefore in and of themselves do not produce and reproduce competition. In other words, rankings incorporate ratings into a more complex type of social operation. Benchmarks, on the other hand, define a certain standard which is based on the top result in a population of organizations (usually corporations) and test the degree of the population's deviation or conformity to the said standard. By identifying a number one, the goal of benchmarks is to motivate all other organizations to catch up. Rankings, no matter how close the scores are, allow producing a hierarchical order of all members of a competitive field, so that any improvement of some entity can be imagined as coming at the expense of others.

#### **4 From local institutions to global actors: global competition for status**

Since the 1980s, at the national level, and the 2000s, at the global level, university rankings have proliferated and generated considerable attention, effectively becoming a “hot topic” in higher education and research. Based on our concepts of competition and rankings, we argue that global rankings are crucial in producing competition for status by combining the above-outlined interrelated processes, which together turn rankings into a powerful type of social operation that transforms the global university field. The effect thereof, we argue, arrives as a set of analytically distinct but empirically intertwined “impacts.” In this section, we unpack the social processes by means of which rankings produce the said impacts.

##### *First impact: globalizing the discourse on university excellence*

Historically, academic performance would have been primarily considered, if at all considered, within a national context or through a disciplinary lens, rather than across countries or disciplines. In either of the cases this would still be rarely done by “outsiders” or third parties of any sort. In contrast, today these discussions are regularly taken beyond the organizational, disciplinary, or national context, to the point at which academic quality is treated as a universal matter of global concern, with excellence being “the new yardstick”

used for its measurement (Paradeise & Thoenig 2016: 1–3). *Excellence* – understood as the highest standard of quality of performance – is what nowadays a growing number of universities around the world at least nominally subscribe to (Ramirez & Tiplić 2013).

The idea that excellence is something that can be universally defined, objectively captured and ascribed to academic organizations of all stripes, and further measured, compared and communicated to an audience, is integral to global university rankings. In the remainder of this section we present the four sub-operations which together globalize the discourse on university excellence.

**Defining the comparable category; establishing a universal framework of comparison; and identifying the dominant model within the category.** The world-wide institutionalization of the rationalized university as an organizational ideal gears a growing number of universities and countries around the world towards a common set of standards about what constitutes a proper university. This isomorphic process is further promoted by the construction of the American university as a “globally favored model” by a host of third parties, typically incorporating features such as research intensity, diversified funding, entrepreneurship, international collaboration, and so on. (Marginson 2008; Mohrman et al. 2008; Ramirez & Tiplić 2013: 440).

According to the three most prominent global university rankings, the dominant model is certainly the research-intensive university (Marginson 2014). Raw research power is particularly rewarded by ARWU which allocates 80% of the total score to research-related indicators, followed by *THE* Rankings with 65% dedicated to research and innovation related indicators. QS Rankings, on the other hand, allocate 20% to research indicators (precisely, citations per faculty), while 40% of the total score goes to academic reputation. The fact that global rankings are less concerned with teaching quality is, to say the least, paradoxical, given that (a) these global rankings, as we shall see below, particularly address prospective students as their main audience and also that (b) most universities are, in fact, not research-intensive.

**Transforming qualities into quantities.** The establishment of a universal framework of excellence is facilitated by the practice of quantification. For example, in evaluating performance, ARWU quantifies quality of faculty, quality of education, research output and



per capita performance,<sup>7</sup> each measured based on criteria that are applicable to all universities in the world, irrespective of location and/or sociocultural context. Research output is measured by the number of papers published in the journals *Nature* and *Science* and it makes up 20% of the total score of the institution, while quality of education is measured as the number of alumni of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals, weighting 10% of the overall score. An important implication of such practices (notwithstanding a methodological bias<sup>8</sup>) is that they take research and teaching even further away from their disciplinary and national contexts, which may have historically favored different aspects of performance from those promoted by a global ranking.

**Visualizing a universal scale of excellence by means of an open-ended table.** The idea of global, quantified zero-sum comparisons of a specific type of entity (university) is matched in the performative dimension by visualizing them in an open-ended list suggesting that all those included in the ranking – and beyond – are (a) part of the same population and (b) evaluated according to the same universal criteria. The open-endedness of the list is crucial because it signals that *potentially* any university can be part of this world-community on the grounds of merit.<sup>9</sup> Rendering the global university field on a world map, as some rankers do, further reinforces the communicative “inclusiveness” of rankings. In result, the fact that most universities in the world are not ranked by the major rankings does not mean that the universalized criteria do not, in principle, apply to them. Quite on the contrary, every university not included in, for example, the “Top 500” (which applies to most universities in the world), is automatically considered inferior and is *de facto* far from a “world-class” institution. But – and this is crucial – they *may* become part of the “Top 500,” no matter what their name, how old they are or where they are located.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.shanghairanking.com/ARWU-Methodology-2016.html>, retrieved on 10 June 2017.

<sup>8</sup> By largely relying on methods of performance measurement such as citation counts or international publications, which vary across disciplines and countries, rankings downplay the disciplinary and also cultural differences and, as a result, privilege certain universities and countries over others (Lawrence, 2007, in Hazelkorn 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Potential inclusion in the list is an important feature of modern rankings because it suggests: “anybody can do it.” In contrast, the first known rankings in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century in the field of arts were of a much more exclusive nature. Spoerhase (2014) cites one of these early rankers, Christian Friedrich and Daniel Schubart, according to whom a rankings’ function is to merely show average artists that they are – and will always be – average, thereby implying the impossibility of ever becoming part of the illustrious circle of geniuses. In other words, these rankings were not meant to spur competitive behavior between artists.

Since the first global rankings were published in 2003, a growing number of non-ranked universities is developing strategies to be included in one of the league tables (Hazelkorn 2015), which is an implication of precisely the open-ended nature of the ranking tables. The imagination of competition by third parties is thus mirrored in the strategies deployed by more and more universities all over the world.

**Imagining a global audience.** Global rankings address a public, or multiple publics, that are imagined to be interested in the comparison of universities' performances. Students, given their growing international mobility, are a matter of particular interest to the rankers. This is further supported by a growing cultural appeal of international mobility, rendering studying abroad a desirable "move" for students and scholars alike (Teichler et al. 2011). *THE* and QS Rankings reflect this trend by using the ratio of international to domestic staff and that of international to domestic students as measurements of diversity or "internationalization."

In effect, third party rankings imagine students to be cosmopolitans, detached from any local or national culture, who want to make the best decision and are willing to move from Berlin to Boston, from Shanghai to London to achieve their goal of optimizing their educational experience. The following passage from the homepage of the QS Rankings is revealing of this:

"As more countries around the world develop world-class universities, there have never been so many attractive possibilities for international students. Find your own ideal study abroad destination with our student-focused country guides, covering university admissions, fees, scholarships, visas, local life and more."<sup>10</sup>

The quote is telling of two important features of contemporary higher education: first, the field is thought of as having undergone important change, because "there have never been so many attractive possibilities," and second, students are imagined as individuals who pursue their "ideal study abroad," presuming they are expected to be willing (and able) to leave their home country. QS Rankings, but also *THE* Rankings and U-Multirank specifically single out students by dedicating sections of their homepages to what they deem

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.topuniversities.com/where-to-study/home>, retrieved on 10 June 2017.

to be students' interests and needs. In the process of addressing it, ranking organizations effectively construct the targeted audience: as a modern student and a member of the cosmopolitan elite, you are supposed to take charge of your own education and compare all universities in the world in order to *get the best education possible*. *THE* especially combines this abstract concept of “the modern student,” looking for her or his best choice, with many first-hand accounts of students who share their experiences, presumably under their real names, in online articles or blog posts on the homepage of *THE*. In contrast to *QS* and *THE*, *ARWU* does not mention or explicitly address students.

Excellence on the level of performance is thus matched, at least in the publicly displayed imagination of two of the three major ranking organizations, by a desire for excellence on the part of a global audience of students, an aspect often missed by accounts that conceive of audiences only in terms of “real people” who “observe” and “perceive” (Sauder 2006; Sauder et al. 2012). We assume this to be crucial for the success of rankings as the ranked organizations are not only confronted with imaginations of competition but also an audience that is imagined to be interested in making the best decision possible.

In addition to students, rankers frequently address other publics, such as (political or administrative) decision makers or, in the case of *THE*, their readership. In a recent study, Lim (2018) shows how *THE* consults and gathers feedback from its readership and wider audience in order to legitimize the competitive field it imagines in the face of criticism and opposition. To the same end, *THE* Rankings also organizes events in different locations around the world, inviting university leaders, administrators and statesmen.<sup>11</sup> The audience imagined by the *THE* Rankings is, therefore, one of diverse tastes and preferences, which may partly explain the increasing complexity of its ranking methodology over time, compared to other global rankers. Most importantly, however, what unites all audiences imagined by global rankers is that they are not of a national kind.

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<sup>11</sup> The discourse is furthered by a whole array of actors such as consultants, politicians, or university administrators, who regularly meet at conferences, publish articles or online videos, and organize panel discussions. There are even organizations such as the IREG (International Ranking Expert Group) who observe, evaluate, and publicly comment rankings (Wedlin 2014). When these actors criticize rankings, they usually take a reformist stance, thereby implying that, in principle, global zero-sum comparisons of “excellence” are a legitimate endeavor, provided the right methodology has been applied. Thus, their criticism does not aim at the abolishment of rankings but rather at triggering the intensification of ranking activities.

## *Second impact: transforming reputation for excellence into a scarce resource*

While early experiments with university evaluations in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century sometimes resulted in the publication of tables that resemble today's rankings (Myers & Robe 2009), their counterparts in the present day and age, by means of periodic yearly publication, construct the reputation for excellence as a scarce resource which universities are expected to compete for. In other words: by evaluating performances comparatively, quantitatively, publicly, and regularly, global university rankings imagine reputation for excellence to be "scarce." This is far from being the natural state of higher education (or, for that matter, any other field). As mentioned earlier, reputation for excellence unto itself is not a scarce resource, as we could easily imagine the world of higher education as one where all universities are benchmarked or rated and improve together, enjoying a common reputation for helping to further the interest of mankind. This, however, is not the world rankings imagine. They help establish the idea that the improvement of one university might entail reputation gains at the expense of other universities.

**Evaluating performances relative to each other.** In terms of comparisons, this implies a perspective that takes into account how scores of any university can be related to the scores of any other university in the world. Thus, rankings imply the claim to deliver a precise measure of "the degree of excellence" universities have relative to each other and to offer a score of performances based on comparisons with all other universities.

By producing *relative* measures of excellence on a global scale, rankings achieve two things that can be easily overlooked but are essential to the way in which they partake in the imagination of competition. First, they *tie evaluation to comparison within a global field*, so that the evaluation of each performance is essentially the outcome of a global comparison. According to this logic, one cannot evaluate a university without comparing it to all other universities. Second, comparative evaluation creates a specific kind of "geography of performance," which is nowadays taken-for-granted but nevertheless a social product that needs to be accounted for. Due to these *performance-based proximities*, universities from Freiburg, Hong Kong and Toronto can be neighbors in a ranking while two universities from Boston can be worlds apart.

Such relative measures help in producing the imagination that the progress of one university, *relatively* speaking, and irrespective of geographical or sociocultural characteristics, leads to the devaluation of its immediate neighbors in the ranking. The situation, thus, urges those who are part of the competitive field to take into account and observe their neighbors in ranking rather than their geographical neighbors.

**Making small differences relevant and legitimate.** Quantifying zero-sum comparisons with highly sophisticated indicators produce and simultaneously make small (and sometimes arguably insignificant) differences meaningful. In some cases, indicators produce minimal differences that might even cause a university to lose hold of its rank. Given the stakes,<sup>12</sup> the producers of global university rankings need to carefully manufacture their trustworthiness and the objectivity of their data, not least because universities themselves are a legitimate authority in matters of academic quality. To illustrate, in the 2017 edition of ARWU, the total score difference between the University of Cambridge (number 3) and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (number 4) was 0.5 in numbers (which might be an insignificant difference in other forms of performance measurement such as benchmarks or ratings).

Although very small differences may easily be disregarded as such, the methodology of the ranking, which ARWU describes as “scientifically sound, stable and transparent,”<sup>13</sup> infuses the difference in score, as small as it may be, with meaning and scientific legitimacy.<sup>14</sup> In addition to the objectivity implied in the methodology used, rankers may create trustworthiness by appealing to legitimated audiences in the higher education field, such as students and policy makers, or out-of-the-field third party experts. The following passage shows how the *THE* World University Rankings addresses this issue:

“The top universities rankings use 13 carefully calibrated performance indicators to provide the most comprehensive and balanced comparisons available, which are trusted by students, academics, university leaders, industry and governments. The

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<sup>12</sup> Ranking organizations can be subject to lawsuits. Prominent examples are TripAdvisor (ranker of hotels) and Gardner (ranker of IT companies).

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.shanghairanking.com/aboutarwu.html>, retrieved on 10 June 2017.

<sup>14</sup> This does not imply, of course, that the real differences between universities are always small, just that rankings can ascribe significance even to small, and arguably insignificant, differences.

calculation of the rankings for 2016-2017 has been subject to independent audit by professional services firm PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC).”<sup>15</sup>

The application of measures to secure legitimacy should not surprise given the regular criticism rankers have to deal with in the field of science in contrast to other fields, say, professional sports. It has been argued that such measures are fundamental to rankers’ claim to expertise, and thus legitimacy, as well as to their revenue (Lim 2018), both of which are particularly pertinent to the non-academic rankers, such as *THE* Rankings. Similarly, Barron (2017) indicates that the creation of the Berlin Principles on Ranking Higher Education Institutions is a result of an attempt to standardize and legitimize ranking practices by aligning them with academic values, thus reducing the “reputational risk” (Power et al. 2009) of ranking organizations.<sup>16</sup> These efforts reflect the significance ascribed to the quantification of performances as the basis of status competition between universities.

**Using a hierarchical table as a visualization tool.** When a table is employed as a means of communication, rather than an information storage tool (Wainer 1992), ranked entities are arranged in such a way as to effectively convey the most important message. In global academic quality rankings, this message is: “This university is the best in the world,” followed by the second best, third, and so on. Therefore, rankings use a table in which universities are arranged hierarchically according to “how much excellence” they have. In doing so, global university rankings suggest that the vertical slots allocated merely reflect “the objective reality” when it comes to performance: (a) not all universities can be equally good and (b) the better a university, the higher its slot.

With these characteristics, tables serve as a perfect complement to the “politics of small differences” described above: they help transform often minimal quantitative differences between universities into a visually unambiguous hierarchical order, signaling that any improvement by one university comes at the expense of other universities, leading as it does to their relegation on the table. Visualization of performances particularly helps to make proximity (or distance) between universities based on performance plausible and, in turn, to

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2017/world-ranking>, retrieved on 10 June 2017.

<sup>16</sup> While Power et al. (2009) use the *ranked* organizations (universities) as their prime example, we want to emphasize that the *producers of rankings* themselves also develop strategies for managing reputational risk.

deemphasize territorial, historical or cultural criteria. This also adds to the often-criticized simplicity of rankings.

However, as pointed out earlier, the simplicity is extremely important for their effectiveness as a tool of communication, as it allows the user to easily “spot” differences in performance where he or she might otherwise be overwhelmed by a wealth of statistical and qualitative information. The rhetorical power of visual simplicity is reflected in the failure of rankings that pass up on this possibility. The U-Multirank, for instance, has been criticized for its rather complicated user interface that ultimately undermines the discursive force of ranking (Barron 2017; Jongbloed et al. 2013).

**Suggesting scarcity of reputation on a global scale.** In combination, zero-sum comparison, quantification and visualization underline the “scarcification” of status as reflected in rankings. In the act of publication, universities are imagined as competitors for various goods (students, resources or reputation) on a global scale. Furthermore, rankings nowadays are usually available in digital format, which allows visitors of the homepages to create their own rankings (e.g. compare only universities from one country), which amplifies this effect.

An important factor of the success of global university rankings is their embeddedness in the competition between countries. Since the outset, global university rankings have promoted – albeit implicitly – relative standings of countries. National media closely follow global rankings and sometimes report on them by focusing on where “their” universities stand vis-à-vis others, thereby amplifying the discursive effect ranking organizations wish to achieve. When certain countries appear to take over, those who lose ground may be alarmed. The following excerpt demonstrates this:

“There were 12 UK universities in the global top 100 in 2011 when the tables were published for the first time. Now there are nine. [...] Some UK institutions are losing stature by comparison and it is partly because of an acknowledgement by some East Asian governments that spending on universities is vital to their economies.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/education-21631406>, retrieved on 10 June 2017.

It is also not uncommon for Asian universities to be portrayed as a “threat” to the Western universities’ rank:

“With the University of Tokyo and National University of Singapore in the top 30 global universities and Seoul National University moving into the top 50 it is clear, universities in Asia are increasingly challenging the West’s role in leading the global market in terms of research, innovation and education excellence.”<sup>18</sup>

As these examples demonstrate, media reports on rankings are particularly geared towards presenting countries and their respective universities as competitors, which, by making it a matter of constant debate, helps the “scarcification” of reputation for excellence materialize in the (national) public discourse and triggers regulatory efforts of governments. Again, our distinct conceptualization of rankings and their role in the production of competition draws attention to such phenomena, which are usually neglected in the literature.

### *Third impact: transforming a stable status order into a dynamic field*

It is often said that *U.S. News* undergraduate reputational rankings revolutionized academic quality rankings (Bowman & Bastedo 2009; Hazelkorn 2015; Monks & Ehrenberg 1999; Myers & Robe 2009). Until they appeared, “academic quality rankings were the province of professors and higher education administrators” (Myers & Robe 2009: 16). *U.S. News* rankings were novel in two important ways. First, being a highly-circulated news magazine, it addressed a large audience, whereas earlier reputational rankings were usually published in academic journals and primarily addressed expert audiences, with some notable exceptions such as the Cartter Report which was released in 1966 and sold approximately 26,000 copies (Myers & Robe 2009). Second, it was the first one to *regularly* publish rankings, framed by the continuous (annual or biennial) publication of rankings, rendering the prospect of status change a purposeful event, instead of something that would unfold in an uncontrolled evolutionary process and at much slower pace. Thus, only when rankings introduce the possibility of *change* in the status order can we speak of the emergence of a field that features competition between its members.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.britishcouncil.org/organisation/press/world-university-rankings>, retrieved on 10 June 2017.



**Regularly revising the universal framework of comparison.** Global university rankings vary in terms of how often they revise their framework of comparison. ARWU stands out as the most conservative one in this sense, as it has not changed its framework of comparison since its inception, with the implication that, as Paradeise and Thoenig (2016) point out, there is not so much movement, especially in the top tiers. QS Rankings and especially *THE* Rankings have a tendency to continuously seek to be better at capturing “excellence.” An important implication of the regular revision of the universal framework is that it keeps the conversation on what constitutes university excellence going, or, in the absence of regular revision, it reinforces the existing criteria. However, regular revisions suggest that “excellence” is not something that is once-and-for-all fixed, but in a constant flux, and thus needs to be revisited in regular intervals, which matches the dynamic nature of truly competitive fields.

In addition to the overall rankings, rankers offer alternative frameworks of university comparison. For example, *THE* Rankings and QS Rankings also publish specialized rankings, such as those for universities under 50 years old (both *THE* and QS have these), for universities within particular regions (e.g. Latin America, Asia, BRICS & Emerging Economies Rankings), or focusing on a particular dimension, such as reputation, graduate employability or subject area. ARWU, on the other hand, features additional rankings by subject, as well as one regional and two national rankings. Much like the overall rankings, the specialized ones also have their yearly cycles, and their publication dates are distributed across the year. However, the overall rankings attract the most attention by far, with their annual publication being a critical event in the yearly cycle of the global “excellence race.” All of this indicates an ongoing expansion process of global university rankings, enabled by the ease of reusing readymade quantitative data.

**Sensitivity of quantitative indicators and the regular revision of methodologies.** University rankings temporalize comparisons, as quantitative indicators are designed to capture every change in performance and reflect even minimal differences. This quantitative sensitivity produces the possibility of constant movement: the No. 1 today might be the No. 7 next year, a score of 45.7 might turn into a score of 43.2 or 52.6. More importantly, quantitative sensitivity *makes change normal and expected* and thus institutionalizes a constant flux in the field.

However, different indicators have different built-in sensitivities for change. For instance, the number of alumni with Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals, which ARWU uses as an indicator of quality of education, is more stable over time than, say, the number of papers indexed in the Science Citation Index Expanded and Social Science Citation Index. Both indicators display less sensitivity than those used by *THE* Rankings which are mostly composite, whereby, for example, the score for “Research” is the aggregate value of the individual scores for research reputation, research income, papers per research and academic staff, and the ratio between public research income and total research income.

Such choice of methodology is more likely to capture small changes, which then results in greater variation in the rankings from one year to the next (Bookstein et al. 2010). Thus, while research often argues that the numbers produced by ranking organizations are in many cases “essentially meaningless noise” (Dichev 2001: 237), we argue that quantitative sensitivity – even though it might be based on false precision, from a purely methodological perspective – is part and parcel of efforts to institutionalize rankings. The numbers are, sociologically speaking, anything but meaningless.

**Visualizing change over time.** Visually, global university rankings (especially their homepages) are similar to other kinds of rankings in that they often not only show this year’s score, but also feature information on last year’s score and/or last year’s position. In so doing, they provide information on how a university has lost or gained ground, thereby emphasizing (the possibility of) and effectively constructing movement. Such visualization technique, therefore, simultaneously displays the present status and the change over time. Although major global rankings differ in the way in which they make information about past performances available to users, this information is fairly easy to retrieve. The homepages of the QS Rankings and ARWU, for instance, offer the possibility to their visitors to compare the universities’ ranks across time.

**Regularly addressing the global audience.** Global university rankings have been periodically published from the outset. When the first ranking, ARWU, came out in 2003, it generated world-wide attention. It was soon followed by other global rankings. Together with QS and *THE*, ARWU is today considered to be one of the most influential global ranking of universities. All three, as well as most other global rankings, are published

regularly. Publication makes change visible to a global audience and thereby a matter of public debate.

To make the suggested competition meaningful, global university rankings imagine their audience to be interested in these yearly movements. As mentioned above, they single out students in particular, but also other possible observers, such as employers and policymakers, and each new publication is an act of communicating “new” information to these observers. This, in turn, has a priming effect on universities. For example, many universities have public relations departments that are aware of when the results are published. They follow closely the events around the publications and promote their position via homepages, newsletters and social media (de Rijcke et al. 2016; Hazelkorn et al. 2014).

It is worth noting that rankers differ in the role they play in the dynamics created by rankings. For example, on the occasion of publishing its annual table, *THE* organizes the “World Academic Summit,” as well as a series of other events linked to specialized rankings, such as Research Excellence Summit, Innovation & Impact Summit, Asia Universities Summit, and so forth. With these events, *THE* Rankings aim to, inter alia, bring together “pre-eminent global thought leaders across higher education, research, industry and government to share best practice and innovation in the development and leadership of world-class universities and research” („THE World Summits“ o. J.).

Indeed, being a news company, *THE* is clearly in the business of “making news,” yet it is also active in its efforts to be relevant, reach out to various audiences, in being responsive to their readership, but also to the concerns of students and the aforementioned “global thought leaders” (Lim 2018). Global rankers such as *THE* thus play a significant role in the global debate on academic quality and excellence and particularly in keeping the public focus on rankings.

Table 2 summarizes the hitherto described four rankings sub-operations and the three impacts they have on the global university field, with each impact consecutively adding a new dimension to the dynamics of this field. Delivered in such a way, these four operations effectively transform a stable status order into a dynamic competitive field.

**Table 2. How global rankings produce competition between universities**

Four rankings sub-operations				<i>Three impacts</i>
Informative dimension		Performative dimension		
(Global) comparison of performances	Quantification	Visualization	Publication	
Defining the comparable category, establishing a universal framework of comparison and identifying the dominant model within the category	Transforming qualities into quantities	Visualizing a universal scale of excellence by means of an open-ended table	Imagining a global audience	<i>Globalization</i>  <b>First impact</b> Globalizing the discourse on university excellence
Evaluating performances relative to each other	Making small differences relevant and legitimate	Using a hierarchical table as a visualization tool	Suggesting scarcity of reputation on a global scale	<i>Scarcification</i>  <b>Second impact</b> Transforming reputation for excellence into a scarce resource
Regularly revising the universal framework of comparison	Sensitivity of quantitative indicators and the regular revision of methodologies	Visualizing change over time	Regularly addressing the global audience	<i>Temporalization</i>  <b>Third impact</b> Transforming a stable status order into a dynamic field

## 5 Conclusion and outlook: studying the proliferation and impact of rankings

In this article, we tried to explain the ways in which rankings produce public forms of competition. We argued that rankings contribute to the production of a particular type of competition: competition for the favor of an imagined public, which is based on the repeated public comparison of performances by third parties addressing and thereby imagining the said public. We then defined rankings as quantified, visualized and regularly published zero-sum comparisons of performances that take part in the construction of this particular type of competition. Throughout, we highlighted the processual, temporal and performative dimension of rankings: that they can function as a generator of competition only if visualized and publicized on a continual basis.

Using the example of global university rankings, we identified three impacts of global rankings in the university field. First, they help globalize a specific discourse on excellence that can be universally applied, regardless of the local context. Second, by producing, visualizing and publicizing often minimal differences in performance, rankings “scarcify” reputation. And third, by repeated publication, they turn a stable status order into a dynamic competitive field, institutionalizing competition for an imagined public as a taken-for-granted feature of the field. Combining these effects, rankings transform the status of universities from something that is implicit, fragmented and largely local into something that is explicit and global, effectively institutionalizing competition between universities as a global “fact,” that is, a matter of (assumed) shared knowledge within a global field.

Our analysis contributes to a more general sociological perspective on the rise and impact of rankings in modernity. We argue that rankings indeed play a major role in multiplying, expanding, and globalizing the discourse on excellence of performance in various domains, ranging from human development of nation-states, to product qualities and prices, the quality of hotels or restaurants, and performances of athletes or artists. And even though each of these cases deserves an in-depth empirical analysis, it can be stated with considerable certainty that rankings have proliferated enormously in all of these fields, turning the reputation for performance or quality into a scarce resource and helping to transform stable status orders into dynamic and often global competitive fields.

In conclusion, we wish to discuss some implications of our analysis for the current discussions on the societal role of competition by addressing the following questions. First, does our analysis of the ways in which rankings produce competition support the idea of a current trend toward a “competition society” characterized by increasing competition? Second, how can it help to analyze the role and impact of competition as a characteristic of global fields?

With regards to the first question and having in mind the current state of research on rankings, our analysis points to an empirical implication that has not yet been adequately theorized in the literature on rankings: the possibility of *decoupling* between the *production* and the actual *effects* of competition. While supporting the idea of a proliferation of competition, we suggest that this trend should not be automatically equated with increasing intensity of competition. Instead, we stress once again that the competition for the favor of

an imagined public/audience as produced by rankings is different from other types of competition in that it is not a direct outcome of the competitors' intentions but is constructed in public discourse based on repeated public comparisons of performances and addressing of imagined publics/audiences. The *public competition* produced by rankings, therefore, might only be loosely coupled with *competitive behavior*. It may or may not lead to the intensification of organizational behavior aimed at climbing up or maintaining one's position in rankings or to what Espeland and Sauder termed "reactivity" (2007). In other words, the rise and institutionalization of rankings, while clearly leading to the increasing *production* of competition, might not necessarily also lead to *intensified* competition.

Our analysis, therefore, undermines the commonplace that rankings, in a sort of knee-jerk reaction, lead to intensified competition. Some rankings may have this effect, while others may not. Instead, we suggest considering the degree of coupling between publicly suggested templates of competition – through rankings and similar mechanisms such as ratings and awards – on the one hand, and the actors' perceptions and motivations on the other, *as an empirical question*.

An important facilitator of decoupling might be the difference between the global template of the research-intensive (American) university, as used and diffused by rankings, and the realities of national and local contexts (Meyer & Rowan 1977; Paradeise & Thoenig 2016; Sauder & Espeland 2009). In other words, it is precisely their universality and their detachment from the national/local culture that makes their success and discursive proliferation possible, but at the same time is likely to trigger decoupling processes. However, the degree to which the global competition produced by rankings actually shapes competitive motives and competitive behavior in different fields has largely been taken for granted and thus still awaits investigation. Studying the societal impact of rankings, thus, requires equal attention to both the public production of competition and organizational competitive behavior, but especially to the relationship between the two.

With respect to the second question, we should note that this more complex picture of the ways in which competition is constructed, but also possibly resisted and decoupled, may also add to the current discussion about the role of competition in global fields. It does so by questioning the tendency in much of social theory to take the existence of competition as a characteristic of fields for granted. So far, the discussion about global fields has largely been

confined to scholars interested in advancing Bourdieu's field theory (for an interesting collection of papers see Go & Krause 2016). Characteristically for this line of research, based on an analysis of the global arts field, Larissa Buchholz argued that a global field "can be delineated along three basic characteristics: (1) as a sphere of specialized practice; (2) with a relatively autonomous logic of competition, and (3) on a multi-continental scale of geographic expansion" (2016: 40).

Our discussion is close to the concerns raised in this definition in that it draws attention to competition as a possible, rather than a given, characteristic of global fields. However, Bourdieusian field theory (as well as in other versions of field theory; cf. Fligstein & McAdam 2012) conceives of competition as a given characteristic of fields and thus tends to naturalize the actors' willingness to compete as a quasi-anthropological trait (as also noted by Marginson 2008). By contrast, our analysis of rankings started with a closer look at the ways in which competition for the favor of a public/audience is socially constructed. It thus suggests treating the question of whether and to what degree such competition constitutes a field as an *empirical* question that requires studying the social construction of – but also possible decoupling from – competition within fields. This requires seeing competition not as a given characteristic but as an empirical variable that may shape different fields to different degrees.

Using these insights for comparative studies of rankings/competition thus helps open the discussion about what constitutes a global field and establish a more pluralistic discussion about characteristics of global fields. It thus makes the question whether we actually live in a competition society a matter of empirical research, suggesting the preliminary conclusion: we live an era of growing *imagined* global competition – the impact of which on actual competitive behavior is largely unknown and up to further research.

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