

Jan Sadlak, President of IREG Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence
[Opening remarks delivered at the opening of the IREG Forum: *National University Rankings on the Rise*, Bratislava, 10-11 October, 2011]

Dear Minister,
Dear Rector,
Dear Professor Devinsky,
Dear Members of IREG Observatory,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

As President of IREG Observatory I am very glad that we can add Bratislava on the map of places where our organization has held its meetings. Last time it was Paris and next event - the IREG-6 Conference will be held in Taipei. So the meeting in Bratislava nicely fits between these two events.

The fact that we have this meeting here in Bratislava has been an initiative of the Slovak Academic Ranking and Rating Agency (ARRA), which is one of the founding members of our organization.

Some supposedly-well-informed experts claim that university rankings are a “lucrative industry”. I hardly have noted that it translates into the budgetary capacity of IREG Observatory, as well as the way our organization has to carry out its activities. Therefore, we depend very much on the external support and partnership. There is one positive side of this austerity as it obliges us to demonstrate that meetings we conven are of interest and relevance. It is also the context in which is organized the meeting we start today. I am therefore particularly grateful for support of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic and the Comenius University in Bratislava.

Many thanks are also due to Elsevier which accepted to be a sponsor of the meeting and we are looking forward to its presentation. As you know Elsevier is a leading provider of science and health information. Its abstract and citation database Scopus is a particularly relevant source of information for a number of national and international rankings. Thus, there is an additional reason why we are looking forward to its presentation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our meeting – the *IREG Forum: National University Rankings on the Rise* will concentrate on issues related to national rankings and the impact such rankings make foremost in the national context. Some could say that such title sounds too upbeat. Maybe yes, but with a closer look at recent developments you can see an increase in a number of national rankings. We are very pleased that some of them will be for the first time presented to an international audience during this meeting.

The appearance of new national rankings and greater attention given to rankings by a variety of stake-holders demonstrate that a growing number of countries and institutions is no longer looking to them with a pre-conceived suspicion. Actually, they acknowledge that rankings are mirrors of transformations and can be in dealing with the biggest challenge facing nowadays higher education – the road towards a new culture of quality and openness.

I am very glad to learn that you, Mister Minister, represent the openness to this relatively new way of looking at the performance of higher education which is the university ranking. Let me mention that a wisely used ranking can be quite helpful in arguing about the need for a more generous financial support for higher education.

I think that we observe a general change of mind with regard to university rankings. Because, as it has been noted in an article analysing the state of higher education institutions in Latin America which was published this week by an influential weekly *The Economist*:

“University rankings miss hard-to-measure factors such as the quality of teaching and the campus atmosphere. They are biased towards bigger universities, which tend to be better known and to produce more research. But what they do capture matters. In their different ways they try to identify beacons of excellence and innovation.”

Ladies and Gentlemen,

There is also another important “first time” of this meeting. As you know in May this year, the Executive Committee of IREG Observatory adopted the *IREG Ranking Audit Rules*. The purpose of the audit, conducted by independent teams, will be to verify if a ranking under review was done professionally, and more importantly, if it observes good practices, thus providing students, their parents and employers with information allowing them to compare and assess programs offered by higher education institutions. In their proceedings the audit teams will review some 20 criteria which have been developed on the basis of the *Berlin Principles on Ranking of Higher Education Institutions*, adopted at the IREG-2 conference in 2006. Just yesterday, the first meeting of the auditors took place, which are those who are actually going to undertake the evaluation of rankings within the IREG Audit initiative. At the final session there will be presented a handbook for the preparation and conducting of audit - *The IREG Ranking Audit Manual*. My special thanks go to Gero Federkeil, Vice-president of IREG Observatory, who volunteered to draft this important document.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the end of my brief opening remarks I would like to say a few words about the place of our meeting – Bratislava. Recently, I come across a text about this city entitled “*Castle, cathedral and river: The soul of Bratislava*”. It was written by the poet and writer, Juraj Spitzer. Let me bring about a brief quote from his text:

“...a triad in the silhouette of Bratislava astonished me – the castle, the cathedral, and obviously the river. The castle represents power, whereas the cathedral or temple represents spiritual richness and authority. The river represents the washing away of the aforementioned forces, as the spiritual content and powers of the city have been changing for some time.”

I hope that during this relatively brief stay in Bratislava we shall at least have a first glimpse into the soul and the beauty of this remarkable city.

Thank you for your attention.