Bundesministerium
für Bildung
und Forschung

Welcome Address

By Peter Greisler
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at the
"IREG-5 Conference
The Academic Rankings: From Popularity to Reliability and Relevance"

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Mr President,

Professor Ziegele,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the mid-1960s, there were just under 80 institutions of higher education in (Western) Germany, with approximately 250,000 students. About 10 per cent of all young people in any given year group chose to start a degree course. In total, there were about 50 different courses on offer.

Since then, the number of higher education institutions has almost quintupled, the number of students has increased from a quarter of a million to more than two million, and the percentage of young people who start university is currently 43 per cent.

The number of degree courses has increased from 50 in the 1960s to more than 12,000 today.

These changes are not uniquely German phenomena. The development towards “mass higher education” has taken place well beyond the OECD area.

These quantitative changes alone show that we need new methods and approaches to bring transparency and guidance into the “higher education jungle”.

This is particularly important for young people who come from social backgrounds in which higher education does not play such an important role and who are thinking about embarking on higher education.

But it is not just necessary because of the lack of transparency in the higher education system.

More than ever before, individual success in life depends on people's level of education and vocational skills. This also means that chosing the "right" subject is becoming increasingly important.

If you are about to invest three, four or even more years of your life in a degree that will probably have a more profound impact on your future than almost any other decision you will ever make, you want to be as well informed as possible.

Employers too find it difficult to understand the different qualifications and degree courses. They need more information. And commercial companies are looking for good locations across the world with excellent research capacities and qualified personnel. Rankings are probably *least* important to the research community itself. After all, researchers are experts in their field and usually know where they can find colleagues working at the same level. But perhaps rankings hold a few surprises in store for them, too.

The popularity of university rankings shows that they cover some sort of need in our society.

In recent years, science and research – and particularly institutions of higher education – have developed into the hubs of national innovation systems. A country's future economic success – and therefore the quality of life of its population – depends significantly on the quality of the research system and the performance of individual universities.

Against this background, other stakeholders – particularly policy-makers in the area of higher education – are interested in learning more about the quality of national universities, particularly compared to those in other countries.

Therefore, when a global ranking places only 10 European universities among the top 50, it is a worrying result, particularly for Germany, whose universities were world leaders for a long time, and where a Nobel Prize gives rise to as much national pride as Germany's status as one of the world's leading export nations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The traditional German model is based on the idea of a homogeneous and egalitarian higher education system. Hierarchical stratfications have generally been viewed with some scepticism. In the past, excellence tended to be ascribed to individual researchers, and not so much to their institutions. Universities were places where outstanding researchers could develop their talents. The star was the researcher, not his or her place of work. And what nit-picker would be presumptuous enough to rank the geniuses at universities according to quality? Against the background of this traditional view, university rankings were – and still are – viewed more critically than they are in the Anglo-Saxon world, for example.

A new attitude towards this uniformity in the higher education system has only started to assert itself quite recently. The clearest expression of this shift is the Initiative for Excellence. In this programme, funding amounting to several billion euros is distributed to universities according to strict performance-related criteria. The funding is intended for the development of additional research capacities and for the implementation of concepts designed to establish universities of excellence. This is the first large-scale programme in Germany that deliberately aims to diversify the

German higher education landcape and is geared towards entire institutions, not just outstanding researchers.

The results of international rankings have not exactly been flattering for Germany, and that was one of the reasons why this new attitude has been able to take hold. I think that this is a very important development, particularly in view of the new role that universities play in society.

Of course, performance measurement and performance assessment activities existed before the introduction of university rankings. However, the traditional methods – for example appointment or evaluation procedures – are strongly peer-oriented and thus subjective, and they focus on individual researchers or groups of researchers. Nevertheless, these traditional approaches still offer valuable information about quality. Perhaps we have to draw more attention to them than we have in the past – for example, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation is known across the world for selecting outstanding scientists. Anyone who is appointed to an Alexander von Humboldt Professorship or who receives the Sofia Kovalevskaja Award is sure to be among the best in the world. A Collaborative Research Centre chosen by the DFG is almost certainly an excellent place to conduct research. And the list could go on.

Rankings – and the "hard" indicators that they are based on – aim to increase objectiveness. This means that the selection of indicators is particularly important.

Rankings are only really useful if the indicators that they are based on do not just measure the things that are <u>easy</u> to measure, but also the things that <u>need to</u> be measured – and that is a complex undertaking. In addition, the results need to be relatively easy to read.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The wide-spread scepticism in Germany and the very intensive debate about the methodological insufficiencies of many rankings also has its advantages:

There are now initiatives that focus on developing new and methodologically more sophisticated ranking approaches.

First of all, as most of you will know, this includes the work of the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHE), the host of this event, which pursues a subject-based and multidimensional approach. I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that the CHE has been a real pioneer, even at an international level.

There is also a pilot project of the German Council of Science and Humanities, an institution that advises the Federal Government in matters related to science and research.

The project of the German Council of Science and Humanities is also subject-based and is limited to the area of research. It aims to develop the new approach of university ratings. What is special about this pilot project is not just its thoroughness, but also the strong involvement of the researchers themselves in the evaluation process. The basic idea is to develop an approach that is predominantly used by the specialist disciplines themselves.

In this way, the project is making it very clear that – contrary to what is sometimes claimed – rankings and ratings are not just of interest to the uninformed general public, but can also be useful to researchers themselves.

The pilot project, which will be presented in more detail at a later stage of this event, also addresses a phenomenon that, in my opinion, has not been given sufficient attention in the past: I am referring to the fact that in some countries – including Germany – a significant share of national research activities is carried out outside of universities.

Almost half of all public expenditure on research and development in Germany goes to non-university research centres such as Max Planck Institutes and establishments of the Helmholtz Society, the Fraunhofer Society or the Leibniz Association. In many cases, these institutions engage in close cooperation with each other and with universities. If you limit yourself to universities, you are ignoring a significant part of research activities.

A professional ranking – even if it is a university ranking – must take the relevant aspects of the general environment into account.

Berlin is an excellent example. The network between universities and non-university research institutions is particularly strong in Berlin. R&D expenditure in Berlin amounted to a total of 2.9 billion euros in 2007. This sum includes 1.2 billion euros in the private sector – and although this plays a very important role for research in Berlin, I will leave it aside for the purposes of this discussion. R&D activities carried out at Berlin universities amounted to 0.7 billion euros in 2007, while non-university research establishments received 0.95 billion euros. In other words, non-university research institutions receive more than half of all public research funding. Although the two sectors work together closely, isolated university rankings simply ignore the vital contribution of non-university research establishments.

I am pleased that the programme of this IREG conference includes a contribution that deals specifically with this subject, using research funded under the EU's 6th Research Framework Programme as an example.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I think everyone here today will agree when I say this: If IREG didn't already exist, it would have to be invented.

University rankings are difficult to top when it comes to triggering quality debates and improvements in the higher education system. To ensure that it stays that way, rankings have to become more widely accepted, and this will only happen if their methodologies are sound. We need to promote methodological advances, ensure that improvements are taken up by those who compile the rankings, and – as was recently proposed in the *Economist* – we need a ranking of rankings themselves.

IREG is making sure that this happens, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank the IREG initiators, particularly Mr Sadlak and Mr Müller-Böling and his team, for their great commitment.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Berlin already means all sorts of different things to different people. I for one will certainly not have any objections if people involved in the "ranking scene" one day come to associate Berlin with the "Berlin principles" and with the audit procedure that will be discussed here today and tomorrow.

Thank you for your kind attention. I hope that this event will offer an opportunity for productive and interesting discussions.