

POSITION PAPER
THE REPUTATION OF UNIVERSITIES

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This document lays the groundwork for an initial approach to the concept of reputation applied to universities, in an attempt to open up a line of discussion, both academic and public, regarding the scope and implications. Society and Education, a recognized partner in the project “Building the university reputation” coordinated by the Universidad de Navarra, has gratefully received the collaboration of Sociopolitical Analysts for elaborating this position paper.

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1. The debate on the reputation of universities

In both public and academic debate, especially in the developed world, the past fifteen years have been witnesses of a renewed interest in the question regarding the reputation of institutions of higher education. Governments are concerned about whether or not the universities of their countries are among the top positions of the international rankings on reputation. The academics use these positions as a quality index of the university systems. The university directors incorporate the management of both the image and reputation of their universities into their work tasks, largely involved in the growing competition for attracting students (and the corresponding economic aspect), professors and resources for research. The professors with the most academic and research ambitions aspire to carry out their work in the institutions with the best reputations.

Most likely, the two most important factors for understanding the recuperation of the concept of university reputation in public discussions are, on the one hand, the transformations in which many systems of higher education are immersed and which heads them into a line of greater competition among other universities; and on the other hand, the availability of tools for measuring reputation which have awakened a fairly broad consensus among the participants of the public debate on universities, in other words, the university rankings.

Greater competition among universities

In many countries, beginning with the English-speaking ones, a variety of reasons explains that the universities have felt the need to compete amongst each other for attracting students and professors and obtaining funds. Two of the principal reasons are: an increase in the scarcity of public funds and the rules for distributing funds for research. Most likely, the basic reason would be the increased relative scarcity of public funds, resulting from the fiscal limitations that the states and regions of many developed countries have reached over the last few decades. In many of these places, the public financing of universities does not

grow as it has in the past or even decreases, and therefore, the universities face a new situation, which involves changeable combinations, and not necessarily stable ones, of the two following decisions: on the one hand, the universities can reduce their expenditure to more income; on the other hand, they can resort to nonpublic sources of income such as the enrollment fees defrayed by the students.

The problem is that it is not that easy to reduce expenditure if one's aim is to attract more students. Compounding that issue, students might not be willing to pay higher enrolment fees. The university management teams may try and persuade these students that the cost of their education is what it is, that public financing (in the case that this exists) only goes so far, and therefore, if the student wants to benefit from this education, he must pay a larger percent of this cost. Attempts can also be made to convince said students by reminding them that the larger part of the benefits that are obtained from higher education will have a large impact on their future income or on their future social status and that only a small part would have an aspect of public good, reverting to society.

They can try this and have success without major difficulties, or they can try this and face important obstacles. The latter occurs in many European countries, countries in which the resistance and protests on the part of the students due to what is known in Spain as "subida de tasas" (enrollment fee increases) may make the governments or the universities afraid to carry out the planned increments.

University management may also combine the attempts at persuasion with a better or more attractive university offer, which usually results in an increase in expenditures, thereby complicating the decisions regarding the specific adjustments that must be made. Something similar to this is what must have occurred in the United States university system, characterized by high inflation of the university prices over the past few decades, no necessarily linked to a greater quality in the university offer, and many times associated with non-central elements of the university experience, which could easily be described as "luxuries" or "extras". In any case, one does not even need to refer to the increase of these extravagant expenditures to understand why a better offer usually implies more expenses: if a university wants the best professors, good salaries must be offered to them.

They can also apply a policy of spending adjustments and for example, reduce the costs of the professors' salaries. In the United States, this involved increased part-time contracts for professors, with low salaries and with perspectives that were very few to almost none for reaching job tenure, etc., and the number of postgraduates used as teachers also increased, reserving the professors of higher category for research and for teaching postgraduates. The problem is that a large part of the funds that the private and public universities are able to attain in the United States depend on being able to always have a sufficient number of

undergraduates, undergraduates who, in the long run, will not likely be attracted to the offer of a second-rate university experience.

Obviously, the professors' interest plays a role which goes against a policy of adjustments of limited funds because they generally tend to resist salary reductions or a loss of purchasing power.

The greatest scarcity of public funds leads to the universities having to use more funds from the students and their families and therefore, they must compete more for this group of people. We should not forget that more and more frequently, a large part of public financing is linked to the number of students that the universities are able to obtain.

Likewise, more and more frequently, the distribution of public (and private) funds for research that the universities carry out in their different forms (individual researchers, research teams or networks, research institutes, etc.) leads to some form or another of competitive assignment. On the one hand, the department or professors' salaries, depending on the country, are linked more to their investigation results, in other words, their scientific publications in prestigious journals. On the other hand, national institutions (such as the United States National Science Foundation) or international institutions (such as the European Institute of Technology and Innovation) finance individual projects (or innovation networks, in the case of the European institution) in a competitive manner, normally including reviewing procedures by peers. Therefore, to the extent that the universities propose to carrying out research work on a decent level, they must compete among themselves for the talent of a researcher; they must have professors and researchers of a sufficient degree of quality so that sufficient research funds may be obtained.

If the universities have to increasingly compete amongst themselves, they have to understand how they are being perceived by the different relevant public sectors in said competition, meaning the students, the professors, the private and public financing entities, and the rest of the universities. This means that they must concern themselves with their reputation, building it up and maintaining it¹.

An indicator for measuring: the rankings

Further on in this document, we will deal with the university rankings more specifically. Here we will only deal with their significance in the revival of the debate on university reputation. The important aspect is that, in the most competitive

¹ A good review of the bibliography on marketing strategies that should be developed by universities that are finding themselves in an increasingly competitive environment, in Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006).

environment that we have just roughly described, useful indicators of reputation have been provided for many of the participants in the discussion.

The reputation indicators that have ended up having the most importance in the international public discussion on the innovation capacity of countries, regarding the quality of their university systems, regarding the international competition for talent, etc., are, obviously, the international rankings, in which universities from all over the world are evaluated. A university's easy ability to adopt practices, initiatives, etc., as a reputation indicator is most likely related to its relative simplicity, not so much in its methodology (which may not be that simple) as in the final product: the university quality summed up in a single score that is published in successive years. This has two advantages. On the one hand, it allows hundreds of universities to be placed in order, from the best degree of quality to the worst, allowing each university to easily perceive its place in the rankings and the observers can make judgments regarding the university systems of each country, calculating the average of their universities, or simply checking to find out how many of them are in privileged positions. On the other hand, the ranking system allows people to observe the evolution of these positions throughout time, thereby converting the publication of the rankings into an annual event, not only in the aforementioned academic and public debates but also in general public discussions. They offer advantages or similar effects, in spite of the existing differences, to those that the publication of the PISA data relative to general education has.

The international rankings have served as input in the aspects regarding university reputation. In this regard, we wish to cite the very recent Times Higher Education World Reputation Ranking, dedicated specifically to measuring university reputation since the year 2011.

In any case, we should not forget that the international rankings were the second rankings to appear on the scene. Their predecessors are of a national type, and were first published in the United States in the first half of the 1980s. The origin of the phenomenon of the rankings is the "America's best colleges report" in the magazine *U.S. News & World Report*, first published in 1983 and published annually since 1985. We mention it here because on the one hand, one of its products is in fact a ranking of universities (colleges), but also because it is not limited only to this classification, but rather provides even more interesting information that is used by the students when selecting a university. This great information, which is inherited from the traditional guidebooks that compare universities (and which continue to be published even today), and the fact that the students take this type of information into consideration when making their decisions, leads to the idea of a more complex university reputation than that which the rankings transmit, and it is this idea that we want to develop in this work.

2. Significance of the concept of reputation

With time, the discussion on university reputation may end up disappearing like other passing trends, or like an issue that is typical of hard financial times, or like a mere response to the existence of some data (the rankings) that demands that the actors involved take a standing. However, this is not very probable because the reputation of the universities (as such, or of their schools or faculties, or of their researchers or professors), just like the reputation of other things in life, is a fairly deep-rooted social phenomenon.

Revival of the discussion on reputation may not yield much more, but it would not stop the reputation of the universities from being relevant to a lesser or greater degree. Further on we will explain more specifically what we understand as reputation in general and what we consider to be university reputation. A quick note is sufficient for discussing their relevance. Finally, speaking of the reputation of an institution or an individual abides by what everyone else thinks of it, which obviously, has never stopped having its effects.

Ultimately, reputation is one of the principal “common currencies” in what we refer to as “university markets”¹. As an example, let’s think of the market where a center is selected by the students², a situation which has developed the most in the United States. What factors are involved in the selection of a college? First of all, the preferences of the students influence the decision for selecting one type of college or another, be it a 2-year or a 4-year type, one which leans more towards future postgraduate studies or one that leans toward the job market, etc., and all of

1 Our perspective is somewhat different from that of van Vught (2008), who tends to see university reputation as an end in itself, and competition between universities (rather, the larger research universities) as a race for reputation. The goal of this race is to attain more reputation, and so universities try to hire the best teachers and attract the best students. Without denying that there is something of this in the behavior of university leaders, we rather understand reputation as a means to get a variety of resources or to maintain an institutional identity over time, as shown below.

2 Raposo and Alves (2007) collect the main references about the factor behind school choice in higher education. See also Briggs (2006).

this of course within a framework of preferences for an environment of knowledge or for more or less specific professions. In the second place, the economical conditioning factors must be taken into account as they are closely linked, even in the United States (one of the countries with the most geographic mobility in the world), to the convenience of moving to another city or not. In the third place, quality aspects can also influence the decision; they are hard to measure, but the students have the aid of comparative guidebooks and rankings such as the *U.S. News & World Report*. In the fourth place, advice from professors and family also weighs in. Last of all, without wanting to deal exhaustively with this topic, it can be pointed out that aspects which are relative to the reputation of the centers offering subjects or majors that one wants to study can also exert an influence; this specific information can be obtained from the rankings because they show the placement of each university depending on the different subjects or majors (Bowman and Bastedo 2009), but the decision made by the student regarding where to study is not just limited to this, for two reasons. First of all, because the judgment made by the student regarding reputation is not limited to his reaction to the information provided by these reports; it also includes opinions obtained from inquiries that are made and multiple conversations that are carried out with other institutions and/or persons. Second of all, because the aspects of reputation (and of quality) that a student may take into account, and the relative importance that the student gives to said aspects, do not necessarily have to coincide with the reputation aspects estimated by the publications.

The aforementioned, with the corresponding national and local modulations, is applied to the selection made by the students in other countries. It might even occur that, in the absence of these indicators provided by the guidebooks and rankings, the students pay even closer attention to the reputation of the different centers, meaning that which is said (or in the absence of information for making comparisons, that which is rumored) about the centers within the reference circles of these students (their families, their peers, their high school teachers, information that may appear in the media, etc.).

However, the university markets are not limited only to the choice of the student. In some strata of the United States university system, and gradually increasing within Europe, importance is also given to the aspect of professors and/or researchers. The universities where professors end up giving classes and/or carrying out research also depend on multiple aspects of considerations, including the reputation of the department or center or destination. An attractive salary, lines of research or teaching to be followed, linked with an abundance of resources may be very important but if the reputation of the center is not good, it may be all in vain; in other words, if the corresponding department has a reputation of being

a conflictive center, falling short of or overdoing politically correct aspects, over-restricting freedom to the newly arrived (or falling short regarding tutelary aspects for the newly arrived), etc. The reasons behind a bad reputation can be diverse, but there is no doubt that they weigh heavily in a candidate's decision.

Obviously, the scope of these reputational markets varies from country to country. In some countries it has been traditionally ample (United States, United Kingdom, Germany, etc.). In others, a tradition of endogamous practices has limited the scope to a greater degree, similar to what may have occurred in Spain until more recently (Pérez-Díaz and Rodríguez 2001: 138-152).

In addition, outside the market of professors, reputation is also a “common currency” in the world of research networks and communities. In this case reputation is, above all, an attribute of a researcher or principal investigator and his research team or his followers.

This can be one of the principle reasons for carrying out research, including transforming the research in patents whenever possible (Göktepe-Hulten and Mahagaonkar 2010). It produces effects, in terms of who is invited to a conference, a seminar, or forms part of a collaboration project, in terms of selecting the co-authors or co-researchers, in terms of who belongs to the review networks or even in terms of who receives more or less funding for research.

In a third university market, the reputation of a university is relevant with regard to contracting its best directors. It is surely more developed in the United States than in Europe, a continent in which the maximum level of government and administration of university institutions is less professionalized and its dependence on a model of supply and demand is also less clear. In the United States, the election of a new President is carried out by a board of trustees, generally after having set up a selection committee in which representatives from the faculty professors play an important role. It is not hard to imagine that when elaborating the lists for the selecting committee to consider, the reputation of the potential candidates as directors of a university is important and carries a lot of weight.

In Europe, with an overwhelming presence of public universities, it is more common for the university president to be chosen democratically by a specific electorate, representing the university community, or a governing body (faculty or senate, for example) which has also been elected by members of the university community (Estermann and Nokkala 2009: 14). It is less frequent that the university president be named by a governing board that has not been elected in this way, with or without the calling of a faculty or senate. In many cases, the appointments require external validation, usually by the administration providing the funding. However, even in the case when the university president is not elected by a governing board or something similar to an American board of trustees, the reputation of

the candidates, along with other aspects, is still taken into consideration. Which aspect of this reputation would be the most relevant is an open question, although it is possible that it would depend on local factors of an idiosyncratic nature. For example, in countries where the election of a university president is, in part, a prolongation of the political-partisan confrontation, the reputation as a right-wing or left-wing could gain importance, or even that of being one who is not politically committed in any way, in cases where the majority of the election board has opted for breaking ties away from the traditional dominating locals.

Obviously, the advantage of having a good reputation is not just limited to its usefulness in collecting resources, attracting students, or contracting good professors or university presidents. Maintaining a good reputation, and consequently being successful in obtaining the appropriate material and human resources, is an indirect means which allows the universities that have differentiated institutional identities to maintain them.

Finally, the reputation of the universities, or rather of their centers, can gain importance in a market which not a university market in the strict sense but is however, decisive for the graduates: the work market. In the private sector, the entrepreneurs (or the company directors) demand that their personnel have university degrees, either because they are convinced that a university degree reflects knowledge and specific skills that are useful for their businesses (human capital theory) or because these degrees are a sign that the people who have them have developed the generic skills and attitudes that are the most suitable for the routines of a productive life in the companies to a greater extent than those who do not have degrees (theory of educational credentialism). It is possible that in the evaluations, the same degrees that, in principle, are equivalent (Economics, for example) but given out by universities with different reputations, will not have the same value attached to them. Ultimately, the information regarding the candidates that the entrepreneurs have a priori does not necessarily have to be of high quality, and it can be complemented by generic judgments which can follow the reputation considerations (Brown and Hesketh 2004) which in any case, do not need to play a central role (Morley and Aynsley 2007).

All things considered, reputation is a common currency in a variety of markets (or quasi-markets) linked to the university life, although to different degrees depending on the characteristics of these markets and the local surroundings in which they operate. The contradistinction between the English-speaking world (represented by the United States) and the continental Europe position is surely useful for discerning the practical importance of the concept.

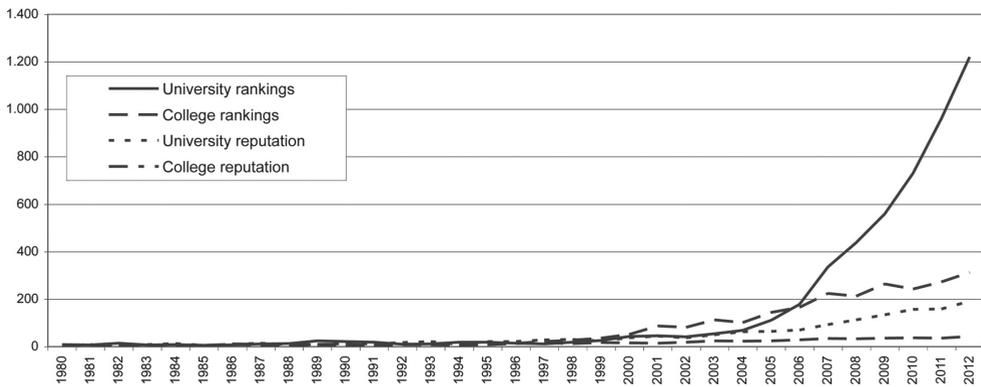
3. Research on university reputation

In general, the debate on university reputation is not as lively in the academic research area as in the public area, but it does arouse a certain degree of discussion in the former area.

Academic interest for the concept slowly began to grow around 1990, as can be observed in graph 2, which shows the annual number of articles indexed by Google Scholar that contain phrases related with our study (*university reputation, college reputation, university rankings, and college rankings*). The expression “college reputation” showed a gradual increase as of the mid-nineties, more or less. The increase in the phrase “university reputation” accelerated in the five-year period 2000-2005 and intensified afterwards, probably fueled by the discussion on university rankings. As can be observed in the same graph, the number of articles that make reference to “university rankings” was maintained at the same level as those mentioning “university reputation” until 2004. As of 2005, and especially as of 2007, the scientific production regarding university rankings grows exponentially, far above the growth of the studies regarding university reputation, most likely due to the success of rankings in the public area such as that of the Shanghai University Jiao Tong, first published in 2003, or that of the Times Higher Education, first published in 2004. The same graph also shows that the launching of the phrase “college rankings” is previous, approximately around 1998; this is logical if we take into account that its presence in the United States is much earlier.

Although the number of articles which contain the phrase “university reputation” has grown, it does not necessarily mean that they are focused on analyzing it. In fact, it is not very easy to find publications that specifically deal with analyzing university reputation, especially in an empirical manner. There is still no consolidated tradition of studies on university reputation. The empirical investigations are not abundant, as expected in a field of study that is fairly delimited and fairly recent on the scene, although we have what we could consider recent classics, as in the very frequently cited study of Nguyen and LeBlanc, “Image and reputation of higher education institutions in students’ retention

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Source: own elaboration with data extracted from <http://scholar.google.es>

Graph 1. Articles indexed in Google Scholar including “university rankings”, “college rankings”, “university reputation” or “college reputation” (1980-2012)

decisions” (Nguyen and LeBlanc 2001), and with researchers who are providing a notable impetus towards this type of research, usually in relation with the effects of the university rankings, among which those of Bastedo and Bowman stand out (Bastedo and Bowman 2010, 2011; Bowman and Bastedo 2009, 2011).

To a large degree, the studies on university reputation emerged from lines of investigation such as the studies on organization strategies, especially those of companies, and in particular, the marketing studies and the studies on company image (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006, Standifird 2005, among others). However, one has the sensation that, in recent times, more studies appear to be found in fields such as the economy of education (Mackelo and Druteikiene 2010, Portera 2006, Tao 2007, for example), using the rankings in their quantitative analyses, sociology of education (Strathdee 2009) or the studies on higher education in general, the field in which interest abounds (previously cited references of Bastedo and Bowman; and also: Sung and Yang 2009, Sweitzer and Volkwein 2009, van Vught 2008, Volkwein and Grunig 2005, Volkwein and Sweitzer 2006).

4. A simple definition of reputation, yet rich in its implications

Gary Alan Fine (2007), one of the current sociologists who have dedicated much of their work to analyzing reputation, distinguishes three sociological approaches: the objective, the functionalist and the constructed. The objective approach assumes that the reputation of individuals reflects their character and their actions, since others may know them to a sufficient degree. It may be that the reputation has elements of social construction but they are faced with a reality that, ultimately, is not all malleable. For the functionalist approach, using the reputation of the other two in the social life responds to the needs of society and institutions. Certain functions must be satisfied, certain social roles must be carried out, including different positions in a variety of social hierarchies. When vacancies are produced in positions of high status, someone has to cover them, and therefore, it is necessary that we previously have evaluations regarding reputations from everyone so that said positions can be filled. The third approach supports the idea that reputation is constructed socially, through multiple strategies that interact with each other. Reputation is a result of a sociopolitical process in which some individuals or groups obtain resources, power or prestige thanks to their reputations, and they dedicate a variety of material resources, especially cultural and symbolic ones, to the construction and maintenance of their reputations.

These three perspectives, fairly easy to make compatible with each other, give us a realistic understanding of the reputation phenomenon in general, and more specifically, of the university reputation. In terms of society in general, the starting point may be functionalist. There are hierarchies and there is a diversity of roles to be carried out. Humanity has never functioned in any other way. Then we need criteria in order to cover these positions with the individuals who are considered to be the most appropriate. Therefore, among other things, we use reputation criteria because it is one of the means that we have for judging this aspect of adequacy. In an absolutely transparent social world (unreal), and in which we could measure the adequacy of these persons to the open positions with mathematical accuracy,

the use of reputations would not be necessary; however, we do not live in this type of world.

Based on the social need to use reputation as criterion for decision making (socially or individually), it is not hard to understand that insofar as understanding and defining reputation, we must take into account its aspects of inalterable reality and of social construction. If the character and behavior of individuals (and the behavior of groups or organizations) were totally transparent and we were all capable of recognizing them, the diverse strategies whose interaction results in a socially built reputation would be quite senseless. If we could speak of reputation in these circumstances, we would strictly refer to the reality of things. Obviously, society does not function this way, and therefore, there are large margins for said strategies, especially if the reality in question is difficult to recognize. If the reality can be known with certainty, to some degree, then the socially constructed reputation cannot be that distant from it. It helps that the estimation of the reputation of individuals, groups, organizations or countries is not a merely individual cognitive process, but rather is brought about by many. If “flock-type” phenomena or group thinking do not occur, different perspectives will be considered, illuminating reality more than a single perspective¹.

In terms of the reputation of universities, these approaches would have different consequences, for example, when understanding the professional success of graduates from the universities with the best reputations (Strathdee 2009). From the objective approach perspective, and probably from the functionalist standpoint, these students with degrees would be valued more than those from universities with a lesser reputation because they are more productive, to the extent that they have been selected and have received a better education. From the social construction standpoint, investigation is underway to determine whether or not these larger benefits might not be the result of strategies, implicit or explicit, of social closing (in other words, reserving certain privileges or benefits only for the members of the groups that are the protagonists of these strategies) on the part of those who attend these universities, on the part of the universities themselves, and on the part of the businessmen who end up contracting them.

A simple, but full, definition of reputation that would adjust to the multiple perspectives that we defend is that of Ronald S. Burt, one of the authors who has studied social networks and social capital the most. In his opinion, reputation is “the extent to which a person, group or organization is known to be reliable” (Burt 2008).

¹ With regard to the association between indexes that are fairly solid regarding economic, political, and technological realities as well as the reputation of the different member states of the European Union, see Pérez-Díaz and Rodríguez (2012).

The words “is known” refers to a process of knowledge and formation of collective judgment, with its socially-constructed components, but it also refers to the corresponding doses of reality (the term “is represented” is not used), to past behavior (or the characteristics) of the individual or group in question.

The words “to be reliable” moves us farther away from a definition of reputation like any opinion that one may have of a person or group, and it brings us closer to the issue that reputation is predictive of the capabilities such as cooperating with others, fulfilling agreements, carrying out tasks and functioning well, adequately providing services or goods, etc. The erosion or loss of reputation may cost the individual, group or organization in question dearly.

While reputation predicts diverse capabilities, relative to the needs or demands of the diverse publics, it is possible that reputation may vary according to the scope of these needs and the diverse publics that evaluate it.

Applied to universities, this definition would point towards the need to distinguish between closely related concepts, those of reputation, image or brand; this is not always clear in the academic bibliography related to these topics. In our opinion, the image of a university is different than its reputation, because it doesn't necessarily have to be linked to the actions that the interested public (students, professors, administrators, etc.) expects to a greater or lesser degree of reliability, or it can refer to characteristics that have nothing to do with reputation. For example, a university can have an image of being more or less modern, but this tells us nothing as to whether or not it is reliable with regard to educating students, carrying out research, etc.

The brand may also be related to reputation, but more likely on the part of the subject who is predicting the reputation. Companies or universities may make attempts so that the dominating factor in the public's perception of them is synthesized by the image of the brand they wish to transmit. However, the brand as a summarized symbol most likely will not include all the dimensions of reputation that are relevant to the diverse publics.

5. The diverse publics, areas and fields of university reputation

An understanding of reputation such as the aforementioned does not allow us to content ourselves, a priori, with one-dimensional versions of university reputation. Leaving aside for a moment the question of whether or not the different aspects of reputation can be reduced to a single dimension (or to a couple of them), reputation should vary according to the type of public that issues judgments, the geographical environment of reference, and in certain cases, the field of knowledge in which it operates. Therefore, given this variety of interests, expectations or evaluation criteria in play, it is expected that the components or elements of reputation be fairly diverse.

Publics

We have already talked about the different publics when we spoke of the importance that the concept of reputation has today with regard to the university life. Basically, the reputation of universities could vary depending on each public, inasmuch as the interests, expectations and evaluation criteria of each type of potentially interested public are different. This does not mean that if we could reliably measure reputation we wouldn't find substantial coincidences among the average estimations made by each one of these publics.

The following participants in university life and in the conversation regarding university life should at least be taken into account. In the first place, we can mention *students*, both current and future. As we have mentioned before, the different future students can be guided by the reputation of the universities when choosing a center for studying higher education. The current students also take into account a university's reputation when deciding whether to remain in their current university or switch to another one, an aspect which is not at all rare in some countries, such as the United States (referred to as "transfer students")¹.

¹ The text of Nguyen and LeBlanc (2001) studies these decisions of permanence or change.

In the second place, one must consider the *professors and/or researchers*. These individuals may have more direct knowledge related to the centers or departments to which they wish to present their candidacy, but we cannot discard the idea of them using reputation to help guide them in their decisions; here, reputation becomes an added criteria to others such as the perspectives of an academic career, salary, work conditions, and the intellectual and cultural environment of the center, etc. We have also already observed how, to a great extent, the academic life, especially in its aspect of research, has very similar characteristics to those of a reputation market.

In the third place, we should take into consideration the *university directors*. They are possibly the individuals who currently put the most importance on their university's reputation and on comparing it with that of other universities with which they are in competition with; this is especially true in countries where this type of competition is more intense, such as in the United States. Their judgments are among the most analyzed in the studies on university reputation because they are included in the ranking par excellence, that of the *U.S. News & World Report*, in which they carry considerable weight (25% of the total scoring in the case of national universities).

In the fourth place, the *individuals with important public responsibilities* regarding regulations, and especially, regarding the financing of the many universities, not only public universities, and not only of the education that they offer, but rather of the research that they carry out, should be taken into account. This would be a public made up of politicians, high-positioned civil servants in ministries and state departments, research institutes, assessment agencies, etc. Most likely, this could be studied together with that which is made up of a multiplicity of private institutions which are also dedicated to financing university research, from foundations to private companies.

In the fifth place, the people, both private and public, *who will employ* the university graduates, should be considered. This type of public is one of the most analyzed in the studies on reputation, a variable which is increasingly being included in the models that attempt to explain the decisions of contracting personnel with superior qualifications.

Lastly, the *general public* could be considered, not as a group of individuals demanding university education (students and their families) but rather as citizens who ultimately finance a large portion of this education in many countries; in this case, not so much studying their judgments regarding the reputation of one or another university but rather placing more interest on investigating the reputation that is assigned to the entire university system of a country, possibly in comparison with how the university is perceived by other countries.

Scopes

Although it may be somewhat obvious, we should still recall that the geographical framework of reference in which these publics, protagonists of the reputation estimations, move is not always the same. Almost all of them can operate on different scales: international, national, regional or local. There are students who plan their selection of a field of study based on a global scale, especially among, but not limited to, postgraduate students. Something quite similar occurs with the professors. Some of them already operate in a global market, but others prefer or have no other choice than to work on a lesser scale.

The question of the reference aspect is even more important for those individuals who are directing universities because university hierarchies based on geographic criteria can often be found in many countries; these are national and regional (or even provincial or local) universities that usually develop their strategies preferably on the corresponding scale; it is well-known that the number of large universities proposing their strategies on an international scale is increasing.

In the same way, we can find individuals with public responsibilities, private research financiers or those looking to employ other individuals setting their sights on one scale more than another.

Fields

We cannot consider any of these publics as undifferentiated aggregates. Later on we will offer some suggestions in this respect. Right now, focusing on students and professors, we should point out the hypothesis that the phenomenon of university reputation and its effects may vary depending on the branch of knowledge, the technique or the professions in which they move (Strathdee 2009). The contents of reputation can vary. It is most likely that the students studying for degrees in fields oriented towards vocational training will put less importance on the research reputation of a university than the students studying for degrees in Physics, Biology or Chemistry. In addition, the former group of students will probably take into account the ease in which they will later be able to find work, an aspect that is much harder for the university graduates of Physics, Biology and Chemistry.

In addition, we cannot discard the fact that in each field, the public in question (students or professors) may spread the news, not so much regarding the general reputation of university, but rather regarding the reputation of that specific university (of their specific centers) in the field in question. This has consequences, especially in terms of the reputation policies that the universities follow, which most assuredly should combine both the general and the specific.

6. The components or elements of reputation

The variety of publics, scopes and fields should be essentially reflected in a great diversity of elements or components of reputation. Or, taken from another perspective, this variety should be reflected in that, a priori, a variety of reputations can be imagined for each university. Each one would refer to each one of the functions that a university can carry out, to specific questions in each one of these functions, and to the conditions in which these functions are satisfied.

In this way, a university can have a good reputation as an institution that prepares good professionals for the job market, that carries out first line of research, that provides a general or liberal education for its students, that contributes to including a more civic or responsible citizen, among other functions.

Or it may be that the reputations are more specific: such as an institution that produces high-positioned civil servants is capable of obtaining high work mark insertion indexes, has good placement programs in companies, educates the future elite of the country, produces many Nobel Prize winners, increases the social capital (valuable relationships) of its students, etc.

Or maybe the reputations refer to the manner in which the functions are met, and a university has a good reputation for having study programs with stages in foreign countries, or for having first-rate installations, or for promoting cultural life (or sports) among the students, or for having select students (the best in secondary school), or for maintaining stable ties with nearby companies or even with farther away companies, etc. Supposing that all or some of these “reputations” exist, there remains one last question to address, that if all these aspects, components or contents of reputation are reducible to a single dimension or just a few dimensions so that one could speak of the reputation of a given university and not only the research reputation, the professional training reputation, the education of elites, etc. To be able to reduce this to just a few dimensions will depend on how the different publics form their reputational judgments and, also, if indeed the different ways in which the university carries out each one of its functions are coherent or not. This brings us to the question regarding what type of factors should be taken into account in order to understand university reputation.

7. Explicative factors of reputation

The investigations that adopt a complex emphasis on reputation, and more specifically, the university reputation, will have to study the two types of factors in order to explain the estimations of reputation made by the different publics. On the one hand, they should consider objective factors, meaning those that reflect the corresponding reality of the institution of higher education as much as possible. On the other hand, subjective factors should be considered, meaning those which mold interests, expectations and perceptions of those who issue reputational judgments.

The objective factors can be multiple, depending on the geographical scope of reference, the field of studies and the public issuing judgments. If we study universities of a regional level, its placement in the international research rankings may possibly be of little importance, but the existence or absence of ties with the regional productive network could be of more importance. In the same way, if we study university reputation in the field of Law, the results of research in the field of Physics could be of little importance. Lastly, if we study university reputation from the entrepreneurs perspective, as people who contracting agents for universities, the research element of the university may not be very relevant but the generic or specialized knowledge of those with a university degree would most certainly be of importance.

We need a relatively ample collection of indicators “of reality” which could be related with the estimations of reputation made by the members of each type of public, assuming of course that they have a certain degree of knowledge regarding this reality or these indicators. Among these indicators, there are many which are already included in the national and international rankings, but it would probably be necessary to have others which are more difficult to elaborate. In many cases, the most common ones refer to basic characteristics of the universities: its age, size, whether it is private or public, etc. In many cases, they refer to the inputs of the university system: the financial resources that are used, other material resources, the student/professor ratio, the professors’ salaries, the proportion of full-time professors versus part-time, the academic extraction of the students, the number of books in their libraries, etc. Usually, there are also output indicators: the

ratio of the number of graduates/ number of registered students, the number of work placements, the number of scientific publications by professors, the number of patents, etc. However, it is more difficult to obtain indicators regarding the knowledge acquired by the students when they have finished college, the added value of the university (how much the students have learned given their starting point), or regarding the teaching methods, or the intellectual level of environment of the university and its departments, etc.

With regard to the subjective factors, we must first distinguish whether we are talking about one type of public or another. One must keep in mind that, up to now, the majority of the studies that focus on analyzing university reputation as a dependent variable usually only consider two types of public, the managing individuals and the professors because these are the people who are included in the available rankings. The public group made up of students is studied when trying to explain their choice of a university, but the reputation then tends to appear as an independent variable and it is not the central point of attention. Likewise, if the university reputations are studied without differentiating by field of study, this variable (field of study) will have to be incorporated by the individual who is evaluating the reputation.

Once the type of public to be analyzed (and field of study, when necessary) has been determined, some of the characteristics of said public will have to be addressed, those that could affect their judgments on university reputations. For example, among the students, we can distinguish between those who have just finished high school, the older students, and the foreign students (Soutar and Turner 2002), and, obviously, between the future university students and those who are already registered and studying in the university. But it is probably interesting to inquire into the possible effects of the social extraction and other family data of the student, his academic level in high school, his expectations regarding what the university can offer him, his cultural ambitions, his degree of media consumption, etc.

Also, for example, among the professors, we could take into consideration their professional categories, their research experience, their antiquity as professors, their connection to research networks, their ideological beliefs, their preferences regarding what quality university experience should be, among other characteristics reasonably related to their opinions on university life in general, and on the reputation of universities in particular.

We will not pronounce ourselves a priori regarding what factors will carry more weight in the estimations of reputation, although based on our experience in a closely related field, that of the social prestige of professions and that of the high school teachers in particular (Pérez-Díaz and Rodríguez 2013), lead us to suspect

that the latter group is less relevant; not so much as in the subjective factors that distinguish diverse publics or fields of study from others, but rather the aspects most related to the personal characteristics of those evaluating reputation. To a certain degree, this could be due to the fact that, for reasons we will not go into at this moment, it is not rare to find consensus regarding the reality of certain social phenomena (such as the prestige of professions), and in the case of university reputation, it is very likely that after these consensus, a fundamental measurement is found more and more often, that of the principal measurement of university quality (and ultimately, of the source of reputation) within our reach, or in other words, “the rankings”.

8. Measuring reputation: the issue of rankings

The university rankings have ended up carrying out a central role in the national and international conversations on the quality and reputation of universities. As we have mentioned before, the “father” of all of this is the magazine *U.S. News & World Report*, first published in 1983, but the current boom of this instrument is due to the rankings of international scope, many of which we have already mentioned (the Academic Ranking of World Universities, elaborated by the Shanghai Jiao Tong university, and that of Times Higher Education). At the United States level, there are around ten rankings and, at a global level, there are more than 15; and there is even a fair amount on regional (made up of various counties pertaining to one geographical area) and national (the universities of one single country) levels¹. The national rankings usually contain a greater variety of indicators, something very hard to attain on an international level. In this way, the international rankings have been leaning more to the scientific productivity of the universities and obviously, to this productivity in English, the language of the international databases of the articles. We consider the rankings, mentioned below, as a source of reputation and as a measurement of reputation.

All of these rankings can be used by all the different type of publics as a source of their estimations on reputation. In fact, they actually are because they are a very accessible source, not only because they are easily available, at least with respect to the principal results, in internet, but also because ultimately, almost all of them end up reducing their evaluations on quality to a single digit and consequently, to a single hierarchy of the institutions. In the latter resides the magic, so to speak, of the rankings, but also some potential problems as we will see shortly.

But we can also use the rankings as a measurement of the reputation as bestowed by the different publics to the analyzed universities. The ranking of *U.S. News & World Report* includes a summary indicator of the evaluations made by

¹ See “College and university rankings”, Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/College_and_university_rankings (consulted on November 29, 2013).

presidents, rectors and those in charge of admissions in the universities with regard to the academic reputation of the rest of the universities. The rankings of Times Higher Education has always included the results of a survey given to professors and researchers, up to the year 2009 strictly focused on research and as of 2010, dedicated to the evaluation of other universities regarding the research aspect as well as the educational aspect. In fact, as of 2010, the Times Higher Education publishes a ranking exclusively based on this evaluation, making it the most useful survey on an international level if we want to measure university reputation in the public made up of professors and researchers. The analyses of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the United Kingdom, which includes a survey given to students, and one in Chile, elaborated by the magazine *Qué Pasa*, which is based on a survey given to entrepreneurs should also be pointed out.

There is no doubt that the rankings have been very useful for the different participants of university life. The *U.S. News & World Report* rankings are very successful and serve as an effective guide for the selection of centers made by students and families, most likely due to the summary indicator rather than due to the underlying information². The extension of this example to other countries must be illuminating a process (that of selecting a university) which for most students, had been done “in the dark”. The international rankings, with their limitations, have contributed greatly to the academic discussion on scientific capability and innovation, resulting in a discussion containing more doses of reality.

Obviously, the rankings have also received their doses of criticism³, which are related to their methodology and which concern the effects that the rankings supposedly produce.

With regard to the methodology, first of all, it is obvious that the rankings tend to measure that which is easy to measure, in other words, that which has pre-existing indicators or can be easily constructed. This involves a probable excess of input and output indicators, but not always very related to the authentic effects of the university in the lives of the graduates and their environment. This leaves out some of the aspects of university life that could be of interest, factors which affect the quality of the universities and measurements of this quality that cover more than just the mere outputs. In general, the critics cite the insufficiency of indicators. Second of all, there is criticism concerning the fact that all the indicators end up being reduced to one, the ranking score in an attempt to simplify and divert the deliberations that are usually applied to these underlying indicators. Third,

2 The rise and fall of a college in the rankings translates to variations in the applications for studying courses in said university (Luca and Smith 2011).

3 See, for all, Ehrenberg (2003).

there is usually criticism regarding the deliberations that are applied to these underlying indicators for constructing the summary index: sometimes because too much importance is placed on research, and too little on education⁴ and other times because too much importance is placed on the judgments of professors and university directors rather than on more objective indicators. Ultimately, these deliberations do not reflect the degree of importance that each student gives to each one of these aspects being considered in the publication.

With regard to the undesired or undesirable effects that are attributed to the rankings, the following stand out: one which has been determined empirically (Bowman and Bastedo 2011) is the crystallization of reputations. In other words, in the judgment of the participants of the survey (administrators and professors), the first published rankings usually carry more weight, even after changing the objective data on which these estimations should be based, especially with regard to the initial summary scores.

Probably the most important aspect of criticism towards the rankings (and indirectly, toward the excessive attention being given to the rankings) would be the fact that they stimulate forms of competition among the undesired universities (van Vught 2008). For example, to the extent in which in the scoring of the *U.S. News & World Report* the degree of selectivity of their students (for example, the percentage that comes from the scores of the last year of high school) carries a lot of weight; this induces the universities to be even more selective, and according to the critics, this could lead to the public universities deviating from their traditional method of providing access to all qualified students (Ehrenberg 2003).

Or they can contribute to a career by reputation with effects such as cost inflation, the growing inequality of incoming money between the different institutions, and a greater stratification of the universities, depending on the social composition of their students (van Vught 2008). In the opinions of the cited authors, other rankings that would include other indicators and would be pondered on differently could stimulate healthier forms of competition.

4 This is one of the reasons for which the Times Higher Education rankings changed, incorporating a survey given to professors regarding which universities they feel are the best, not only in research but also in education.

9. Managing reputation and other open questions

This position paper does not intend to offer answers to the different questions regarding university reputations because this field of study is very recent and there is still no sufficient corpus of research available. Our work has attempted to propose principal lines of discussion and offer some criteria for evaluating the possible answers and so that this discussion would be more fruitful, both to the different university communities as well as to those that make decisions in each university.

Without a doubt, the concept of reputation as a common currency in a variety of university markets is important, but what remains to be known, among other things, is how much weight reputation carries in the decisions of the different participants in comparison with other factors that affect them. We propose a definition that is rich in reputation concept implications, but this has not been explored enough yet and, in particular, quite a bit of empirical and analytical work remains to be done in order to be able to distinguish it from the concepts of image and brand. We are also convinced that the studies on reputation should distinguish between publics, scopes, and fields as well as take into consideration objective and subjective factors when explaining reputation; however, there is a need for more empirical research in order to discern if our proposal is 100% logical or if we should just content ourselves with a less ambitious focus. Lastly, one of the most current and hottest questions remaining is the relationship between rankings and reputation, probably the question that has generated the most controversy and the most research.

Therefore, there are still many unanswered questions which future research will respond to with time, and the conference that motivated the writing of this position paper will address. However, if it is really best to start off from the concept of reputation as that which has been proposed, and if the criticism to the usual substitute of reputation in the discussion (the rankings) has a great deal of truth to it, then some interesting implications can be derived from all of this, especially regarding how the universities are incorporating or going to incorporate the idea of reputation into their own management. Should they start from understanding

that they have a single reputation or one that varies depending on the public or the field involved? Is it possible to manage reputation in the same way a brand is managed, or are there aspects of reputation which go beyond that of marketing? Even knowing that many participants in the discussion and the competition take into account the rankings in their proposals and decisions, is it logical to allow oneself, to a certain degree, to be blindly led by what the rankings measure, simply aspiring to improve the corresponding indicators so as to climb to higher positions in the classification? In countries like the United States, are they not dedicating an over-abundance of resources that has ended up being a mere competition for reputation? Therefore, isn't there an excessive amount of resources being used up and/or are they possibly deviating from a praiseworthy end? With respect to this, an important more in-depth discussion could be proposed regarding the ethical considerations of this possible competition for reputation.

Lastly, among other questions still open to discussion, in view of the probable differences in the respective university markets, what can the European universities learn regarding the management of reputation that is being carried out in the United States? Will the case of the different types of excess derived from an overly simplified use of the rankings repeat itself in Europe or will the European universities take advantage of the positive aspect, the increased transparency of the university system with regard to their participants?

We feel that all of these questions can lead to a fruitful and interesting encounter, and in any case, they can offer ideas for reflection to all citizens interested in the topic of university reputation.