Chapter 2
Reflections on Globalization
and University Life

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Many years ago, the British comedic team Monty Python staged a football match between a team of Greek philosophers and a team of German philosophers. After a lot of inconsequential dallying about (clearly, the philosophers had little understanding of the game), the match was won by the Greeks. Archimedes saw the light, shouted “eureka”, and dribbled the ball into the net – without meeting much resistance.

The sketch is a painful reminder that it may be difficult to discern, in philosophy or scholarship, whose technique is best. While it might be a nice parlor game to try to decide, with the assistance of well-chosen alcoholic beverages, whether the Greek philosophers would have beaten the German philosophers, or to discuss the relative merits of French post-structuralism and the English analytical school, clearly, as Monty Python reminds us, such comparisons should not be taken too seriously.

Yet, in today’s academic world, they are taken seriously – very seriously. Every year some organization or other presents a new ranking of how universities fare against each other or, more entertaining still, how various specialized schools fare in comparison to each other. The law school rankings in US News and World Report are a modern classic – and, for its publisher, no doubt, a huge commercial success.\(^1\) Alternative rankings, such as those compiled by Brian Leiter,\(^2\) may be more specific (by ranking separately in each area of specialization, or separating faculty quality from student quality), but they still engage in the same unpersuasive comparisons and are seemingly based on the same premise: that somehow it may be worthwhile to compile such rankings.

\(^1\) Available at http://www.usnews.com (visited 5 September 2007).
\(^2\) Available at http://leiterlawschool.typepad.com (visited 5 September 2007).

The interest in rankings and comparisons owes much to globalization. Globalization, whatever else it may be, usually includes a tendency towards greater competition across boundaries. Where once the University of Helsinki would strive to be the best institution of higher learning in Finland, and later took pride in picturing itself as one of the best in the Nordic world, these geographical limitations have lost much of their plausibility. Intuitively, it makes little sense to strive to be the best in Finland if the general level of education in Finland is below par. To be Finland’s finest means something, however, if Finland itself is also seen as having a high level of education. Thus, globalization stimulates a natural coalition between education policy makers and the universities. Ministry of Education bureaucrats wish to boost Finland’s relative position among all the world’s educators. (And have met with considerable success: Finland typically does very well in the elementary school investigations known as PISA).³ Officials seek to advance the nation’s relative position, partly for reasons of status, but also because a high level of education usually supports a high level of development. Finnish universities have similar ambitions, again partly for status’ sake, but also because a high ranking may help to generate income in the form of consultancy assignments or public funding. The OECD, home of the PISA rankings, puts it unapologetically: “The prosperity of countries now derives to a large extent from their human capital, and to succeed in a rapidly changing world, individuals need to advance their knowledge and skills throughout their lives.”⁴

Still, those rankings give rise to some surprising results. Thus, Dutch students might be dismayed to find that their perennial favorite (according to regular rankings carried out by the weekly magazine Elsevier),⁵ Tilburg University, does not make it to the top 200 of some of the competing rankings – and is one of only two Dutch universities ranked outside the top 200. Indeed, in the Shanghai rankings of 2007,⁶ it is the only Dutch university not listed among the top 500. Likewise, universities doing well in one ranking may fare poorly in another. It all depends on how things are measured and compared, and on what exactly is being measured and compared.

Still, the relative quality of rankings aside (which ranking ranks best?), there is a deeper issue at stake, relating to the very phenomenon of ranking

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³ This stands for Programme for International Student Assessment, and is an initiative of the OECD. Typically, Finland ranks among the top five (this covers the OECD member states plus a number of affiliated states) in the three areas which are measured: reading, science and mathematics, with a subscription on top spot in reading. For more details, see http://www.pisa.oecd.org (last visited 22 August 2007).
⁴ The words are taken from the foreword to OECD, Learning for Tomorrow’s World: First Results from PISA 2003, at 3, available at http://www.pisa.oecd.org (last visited 22 August 2007).
⁵ Available at http://www.elsevier.nl (visited 5 September 2007).
⁶ Available at http://ed.jstu.edu.cn (visited 22 August 2007).