CHAPTER 9

WHAT IS THE MISSION OF THIS UNIVERSITY? THE QUESTION OF ISOMORPHISM AND QUALITY PRACTICES IN THE ERA OF INSTITUTIONAL RANKINGS

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ABSTRACT

Using organizational theory as a lens, in this chapter, the author critiques the neoliberal rationality in which the national and international ranking systems take precedence over the institutional missions and visions in institutional operations. The author argues that these essentialized ranking systems overlook the necessary diversity and uniqueness of institutions in the higher education system. The author outlines the potential role of mission statements in setting the institutional priorities, and the unnecessary pressure caused neoliberalism against such priorities. The implications of such imperatives for quality in various academic practices are identified and the unfairness of coercive isomorphism in higher education is illustrated. The author then proposes a spatial approach in which universities, nationally and internationally, can appreciate diversity in identity and work together, drawing from each other's strengths to strengthen the higher education system that will support students and promote national economies.

Keywords: Higher education; mission statements; isomorphism; neoliberal university; institutional diversity; institutional rankings

INTRODUCTION

A mission statement is a significant component of every university. Universities are accredited based on, among other things, the existence of clear mission statements which identify them in terms of how they want to be known and how they intend to conduct their business. In addition to the necessity for accreditation, "A clear mission statement helps [institutional] members distinguish between activities that conform to institutional imperatives and those that do not" (Morphew & Hartley, 2006, p. 458; see also Bayrak, 2020; Cortés-Sánchez, 2018). Although different institutional mission statements are somehow similar because of the common practices of all universities – that is, research, tuition and community engagement – they still assist in locating the institutional identity (Hladchenko, 2016). This position espouses Bayrak's (2020, p. 1) summary of the value of mission statements, namely that they typically answer the questions, "Why do we exist?" and "What is important to our stakeholders?"

However, while each institution has its own mission statement, the ranking of universities which have been brought about by the audit and managerial culture of the neoliberal rationality (Shore, 2008; Shore & Wright, 2015) has become the general mission. All universities are ranked in the internationally and locally essentialized ranking systems where they are somehow compared, as if they were similar and equal in every respect. Shore and Wright (2015, p. 428) note:

> University leaders today are confronted with a bewildering array of measurements that rank different aspects of a university, everything from its creditworthiness and success in attracting competitive funding to its environmental sustainability, its standing in the world, and its score for "student experience." Many of these numerical systems measure things that academics do not regard as important to teaching and research, and some academics have used their expertise to show how these rankings are arbitrary, unreliable, and flawed.

Donetskaia (2017, p. 619), for example, notes that the assessment indicators for ratings in Russia, such as "the number of students winning All-Russian Olympiads," are difficult to calculate for all universities. This leads to unfair competition and creates "opportunity for the 'chosen' set of [universities] to occupy the best positions." In such cases, the institutional rankings "reproduce the deep structural inequalities across the [higher education] sector – inequalities that, in turn, reinforce the social and economic inequalities [in society]" (Nixon, 2020, p. 13). On the other hand,

> University rankings form a key part in the construction of "world class" as a measurable and purportedly attainable goal for universities – and the construction of an organizational identity as "ranked" and "measured." (Benner, 2020, p. 27)

This situation creates anxiety and panic for universities, causing them to want to "catch up" with the highly ranked and prestigiously acknowledged universities. The whole competition for ranking leads to institutional isomorphism (discussed below) which, I posit, challenges not only the institutional missions, visions and uniqueness of institutional types but also quality of practices at individual and institutional level. I also argue that, whether local or international, institutional rankings are a form of colonial mechanism to which universities are expected to conform or else suffer the

consequences of marginalization and exclusion from resources or even fair participation and recognition in the global higher system. Thus, using examples from a South African context, I argue that if institutional rankings are necessary at all, they should be rethought in consideration of various contextual issues, including university types, academics' interests and identities and institutional resources and geographies, to mention but a few.

ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY THEORY AS A THEORETICAL LENS

This chapter draws from organizational identity theory. Lin (2004, p. 803) describes organizational identity as an organizational member's answer to "questions such as 'Who are we?' 'What are we doing?' 'What do we want to be in the future?'" Albert and Whetten (2004) draw attention to two aspects in the concept of organizational identity: the external and the internal identification. In other words, organizational identity pertains to how the organization is defined and characterized by others as well as how it defines and characterizes itself. Using an example of a corporate organization, Albert and Whetten (2004) state that in pursuit of setting its identity, an organization would ask questions such as "which of several new products to market, which of several companies to acquire, which of several divisions to sell, or how to absorb a 20% budget cut internally" (p. 89). They emphasize that this means organizations "face choices of some consequence" (p. 89). These authors further indicate that ideally organizations engage in debate regarding their alternatives "in terms of some model of rationality in which questions of information, probability, and expected utility dominate the discussion" (p. 89). Such discussions may extend to the questions of goals and values after which, if there are still disagreements, identity questions such as "Who are we?" "What kind of business are we in?" and "What do we want to be?" may begin to be asked (Albert & Whetten, 2004, p. 89).

Lin (2004, p. 803) identifies three criteria through which the organization identifies itself in the mission statement, namely "centrality, distinctiveness, and durability." She defines each of these concepts as follows:

> Centrality means that the statement should include features that are important and essential to the organisation […]. The criterion of distinctiveness emphasises that the identity statement should be able to distinguish the organization from others. A distinctive identity statement usually includes organisational ideology, management philosophy, and culture. It helps the organisation locate itself in a specific classification. The character of durability emphasizes the enduring nature of organizational identity.

If these identifiers are anything to live by, universities would strive to strengthen their identities rather than to be like others. If this happens, the universities would be viewed as part of a large space in which quality can possibly be enhanced through positive interactions, interrelations and support for quality in diversity. This point advances Massey's (2005) proposition that space is a dimension of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality. Multiplicity and plurality

in the higher education space, at any level, can be resourceful for quality and quality assurance rather than for competition or pressure.

INSTITUTIONAL TYPES AND DIFFERENCES

While institutional mission statements may be somehow similar in terms of their reference to research, teaching and learning and engaged scholarship, universities differ in many. For example, a European website[1] identifies at least seven types of universities in Europe, namely state universities, private universities, specialized universities, general universities, medical universities, science/technical colleges, and art schools. According to this website, state universities differ in terms of the governments' control or power over their practices. The website provides examples of Germany and the UK where professors in the former are regarded as civil servants while in the latter, they are private employees. Often the state universities offer free or low fee education in Europe. Therefore, even though they are all referred to as state universities, they are still different; thus, addressing them as similar or comparing them uncritically can be both unfair and inaccurate. It can be assumed that the extent or even the quality of academic practices offered in such institutions depends on the amount of funding they receive from the government. The funds for resources they need to achieve their institutional missions are externally dependent, but when compared internationally, this dependence is not adequately acknowledged.

Another example is South Africa where there are three university types in principle: traditional universities, universities of technology, and comprehensive universities. The country's White Paper on post-school education and training (Republic of South Africa, 2013, p. 29) notes that different universities are deliberately instituted "in order to ensure that the [higher education] sector meets national developmental needs […]. All types of institutions are equally important to the overall system." The White Paper further states that "[e]ach institution must have a clearly defined mandate within the system" (p. 30). Therefore, even if mission statements may seem similar in these different institutional types regarding the previously mentioned key university performance areas, mandates differ. For example, the Vaal University of Technology has this mission statement in its website: "To produce employable and entrepreneurial graduates who can make an impact in society." This statement identifies the University as focusing on vocational training as its priority. The interesting issue, however, is that the rankings do not speak to this focus; not to different university types or even their geographies in terms of location and its impact on resources.

It is also important to note that in all parts of the world the university types are just a general categorization because each university has its internal structures that may be different from those of others of its type. For example, some traditional universities have medical schools, and some do not. Some have business schools, and some do not. In the case of South Africa, some universities that are in rural contexts are referred to as historically disadvantaged in terms of resources and prestige. Mainly, these universities accommodate students that

are marginalized by the so-called prestigious universities because of their relatively unsatisfactory academic performance in schools. All these contextual issues have a role in student outcomes and research output rate. But, when it comes to rankings, they are in the same pot in which they are stirred together with other universities, some of which enroll only A students and employ internationally renowned scholars. I posit that these internal structural differences should matter in the macro and micro ranking systems because they put the institutions at either an advantage or a disadvantage over others. In the following section, I discuss isomorphism as a concept that defines the homogeneity of universities.

ISOMORPHISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Regardless of their types, contemporary universities work under pressure to somehow compete with their counterparts or to aspire to be like others. While there may be other processes that cause this pressure, I look at what DiMaggio and Powell (1983, p. 149) refer to as isomorphism – "a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions." DiMaggio and Powell (1983) describe isomorphism as resulting from some homogenizing forces in organizational systems (see also Martínez-Ferrero & García-Sánchez, 2017; Mizruchi & Fein, 1999). Thus, in the context of this discussion, isomorphism refers to the tendencies that homogenize the higher education system; the tendencies that are driven by the neoliberal institutional rankings. There are three types of isomorphism, namely coercive isomorphism, normative isomorphism and mimetic isomorphism.

Coercive Isomorphism

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) define coercive isomorphism as a result of "both formal and informal pressures exerted on organisations by other organisations upon which they are dependent and by cultural expectations in the society within which organisations function" (p. 150). As alluded to above, institutions and individual staff members in the institutions are, in one way or another, not independent because they need support in terms of resources, such as financial, infrastructural and human. This dependence causes the practices to be directly or indirectly controlled by the demands of the resource providers or of those with and in power, in a process of coercive isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Mizruchi & Fein, 1999). This type of isomorphism is the result of "political influence and the problem of legitimacy" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 150). Seo and Douglas Creed's (2002) statement explains that "organisations gain legitimacy and needed resources by becoming isomorphic with their institutional environment" (p. 226). Failure to be isomorphic may have consequences, including limited student enrollments and low prestige. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) suggest by way of example that schools may have to hire particular types of teachers or administrators or change and promulgate their curricula to conform with national standards. It goes without saying that such schools would be coerced by the reasons of dependence to conform, and to do as others do.

Mimetic Isomorphism

According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), homogeneity of organizations does not result only from coercion but also from imitating. They argue, "When organisational technologies are poorly understood […], when goals are ambiguous, or when the environment creates symbolic uncertainty, organisations may model themselves on other organisations" (p. 151). This is mimetic isomorphism which results from uncertainty, lack of confidence or lack of clarity on goals (Martínez-Ferrero & García-Sánchez, 2017; Mizruchi & Fein, 1999). Martínez-Ferrero and García-Sánchez (2017) argue that mimetic isomorphism occurs where organizations will adopt "referenced behaviours" of the other organizations, "modelling themselves on such behaviours" (p. 105). Mizruchi and Fein (1999) contend that

> [i]n situations in which a clear course of action is unavailable, organisational leaders may decide that the best response is to mimic a peer that they perceive to be successful. (p. 657)

From these statements, it seems as if these authors overlook the global pressure caused by institutional rankings. Institutions may have a clear course of intended action indicated either in institutional mission statements on in other documents, but they also realize that when they are compared to other institutions, the "clear course" is less considered. Furthermore, mimetic isomorphism may be an indirect result of coercive isomorphism because when standards are externally set, as is the case with the ranking systems, institutions are left with limited choices but to mimic the top ranked. For example, Mizruchi and Fein (1999) contend that the isomorphic tendencies of organizations did not arise because of competition "or an objective requirement of efficiency but rather as a result of organisations' quests to attain legitimacy within their larger environments" (p. 656).

Normative Isomorphism

Professions have unique norms that identify members of that profession, making their practices similar. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue that this normative isomorphism results from two processes. First, members of professions receive similar training which socializes them into similar worldviews. These worldviews direct the professional practices such that one would not be regarded as belonging to that profession if her practices were not in line with these worldviews. Second, members of professions interact through professional and trade associations, which further diffuses ideas among them. These authors note that universities, professional training institutions and professional associations create norms and rules and prescribe acceptable behaviours for professionals:

> Such mechanisms create a pool of almost interchangeable individuals who occupy similar positions across a range of organisations and possess a similarity of orientation and disposition that may override variations in tradition and control that might otherwise shape organisational behaviour. (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 151)

This form of isomorphism is unavoidable because it qualifies individuals to assume certain identities. Martínez-Ferrero and García-Sánchez (2017) even note that normative isomorphism is mandatory as professionals need to comply to

certain standards. The problem is that those individuals/professionals are, somehow, "universities" (a university is not just the buildings) and the expectation then is that a university (e.g. teacher educator) should be similar to the other university, but this is not always possible because the tools and context of practice are not similar. Martínez-Ferrero and García-Sánchez (2017, p. 104) even note that compliance to norms varies "according to the [institution's] culture, norms and values derived from the national [or institutional] environment." They say, for example, that countries at different stages of socio-economic development will not have similar concerns and priorities. They should not be compelled to have these similarities.

These three forms of isomorphism, according to Mizruchi and Fein (1999, p. 657), "are not necessarily empirically distinguishable" and they may coincide. In fact, institutional ranking systems are a form of coercive isomorphism which forces mimetic isomorphism in the institution, which also derives from normative isomorphism. Sadly, some of the isomorphic changes influence practices that focus on similarity more than they do on efficiency (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Seo and Douglas Creed (2002, p. 226) note that isomorphism causes conformity to institutional arrangements which have been found to have a possibility to "conflict with technical activities and efficiency demands." In addition, while academics in the universities play a crucial role in developing the institutional identities (in terms of the quality and quantity of their teaching and research practices), they work interdependently with other groups or persons (e.g. managers and administrators). Some of these groups or persons are strategic decision makers whose decisions may compel one form of isomorphism or another.

ISOMORPHISM THROUGH INSTITUTIONAL RANKING SYSTEMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In this section, I deliberately refer to isomorphism as one process whose role is to impose similarity between national and global universities – to contextualize institutional rankings and homogeneity. Altbach (2012) describes university rankings as "an inevitable result of higher education's worldwide massification, which produced a diversified and complex academic environment, as well as competition and commercialization within it" (p. 27, see also Hazelkorn, 2014). The impression created by these rankings is that the higher a university is in the rank, the higher it is in quality regarding the main university functions. Referring to this matter, Hauptman Komotar (2020, p. 78) highlights that "higher education institutions are continuously emphasising the importance of improving their position on world's most influential rankings" (p. 79) and identifies various levels of implications for such rankings. First, they guide prospective students in making decisions about their studies. Second, institutional leaders regard these rankings as "a management and a strategic decision-making instrument" (p. 78). Third, governments see them as an information regarding the quality of institutional academic programs and, fourth "for profit-oriented media, they represent a means of new

commercial opportunities." Hazelkorn (2014) acknowledges that the ranking approaches and purposes differ but that they all form part of a "greater transparency, accountability and comparability – the level of enquiry increasing in response/reaction to global and stakeholder pressure" (p. 341). While these can be regarded as valuable aspects concerning university rankings, there are various issues that are at stake about these rankings. Altbach (2012, p. 28) identified at least six problems related to them, including presuming "zero-sum game," absence of teaching, dominance of research, dubious validity of reputation, center–periphery creation and methodological inconsistency or "goalpost move." Altbach regards some global ranking systems such as the Academic Ranking of World Universities and the Times Higher Education World University Rankings as addressing some of these shortcomings. However, as argued in this chapter, there is still not enough justification for world university rankings in their present form. They impose isomorphism, which is unfair, resulting in uncritical competition and pressure toward the impracticable and unnecessary homogeneity among universities and individual academics. Yet, apart from other crucial issues that the university rankings overlook, such as university selectivity on admission, students' welfare and university academic foci, each institution has its own publicized mission and vision. The university ranking systems have been essentialized to the point of ignoring these institutional identifiers.

LEVELS OF PRESSURE EMANATING FROM UNIVERSITY RANKINGS AND ISOMORPHISM

University rankings cause pressure at various levels of the higher education system, at both institutional and individual level. At the institution level, it appears that institutions tend to imitate others instead of strengthening the practices that make them categorized the way they are (in terms of types) in order to improve their quality. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) describes this as structuration which homogenizes organizations and leads them to change their goals and sometimes practices. Seo and Douglas Creed (2002) explain this tendency as a quest for institutional survival. They argue,

> Certainly, institutional isomorphism that increases legitimacy is an adaptive move for survival. A widely noted paradox arises when such adaptive moves make adopters less able to adapt over the long run. (p. 227)

This becomes more than just a possibility when one considers the probable unsustainability of the legitimized practices in institutions where they are imposed through isomorphism. Seo and Douglas Creed (2002) refer to researchers who comment that conformity also has rewards for institutions "[…] such as reputation, resources, and survival chances, at the expense of efficiency" (p. 227). They further argue that

> institutional environments are often imbued with sharply inconsistent prescriptions for action, all supported by rationalised myths. Thus, organisations tend to incorporate all sorts of incompatible structural elements, practices, and procedures in the search for legitimacy. (p. 228)

Two issues can be identified from Seo and Douglas Creed's (2002) arguments: (1) universities are unable to operate in isolation because of internalization and globalization, and (2) this inability causes universities to be pressured to actions that are unsustainable and sometimes incompatible with their institutional identities and cause professional conflict on a micro level to staff. An example of this pressure in South Africa is that individual academics work toward and aspire to academic rating by the National Research Foundation (NRF). While NRF rating is an individual academic's goal, the reputation of universities also depends, among other things, on the number of rated academics in a university. Although not directly, this situation creates inter-institutional competition for rated or potentially close-to-being rated academics for the sake of the institutions' reputation. Therefore, institutionally, it becomes imperative to focus on achieving the institutional missions and strategic plans and to manage and monitor them, while also attempting to "catch up" with their counterparts at the highly ranked universities. This happens because institutions wish to be equally legitimized as their counterparts.

The second level of pressure is at individual level – therefore, it extends from the institutional one. Individual staff members are often obliged to rethink their identities and even abandon their passions in order to be on a par with their counterparts in the top-ranked universities or in the same types of universities as theirs. For example, Madikizela-Madiya (2016) reports that some academics are more passionate about teaching than they are about research for publication, but research is the main key for promotion to higher academic levels. Therefore, academics in Madikizela-Madiya's study had to focus more of their energy on conducting research for publication than research for teaching. Sadly, over time, this tendency has escalated to pressure for more research output over a short period of time; a situation that has bred "quick journals."

Another level of pressure can be identified in inter-institutional competition for students (and funding). It is unfortunate that this form of competition has the potential to affect quality reproductively because students are attracted by institutional prestige and reputation, rather than by paying attention to the expertise they want to achieve after university education. In this regard, Hyslop-Margison and Sears (2006, p. 3) argue:

> [H]igher education operates as a "positional good" … in which student places offer better social status and lifetime opportunities than others. The positional aspect is not the only consideration in the minds of prospective students, but it is more important than teaching quality. Institutional reputation is known, teaching quality mostly is not. The acid test is that when faced by choice between a prestigious university with known indifference to undergraduate teaching, and a lesser institution offering better classroom support, nearly everyone opts for prestige.

What this notion of prestige and reputation means is that prestigious universities will enjoy higher enrollments followed by possibly more funding, causing recurring limited funding and resources in the less prestigious ones. Limited funding and resources will obviously affect quality teaching and research in an institution and therefore limited possibilities of "catching up" with the prestigious universities. The inter-institutional competition takes place both locally and

internationally due to the globalization of higher education. However, as Hyslop-Margison and Sears (2006) argue, while universities are becoming global institutions, global engagements are not uniform. They may even be uni-directional, in which case the universities in one direction may have the quality of their practices diluted by the influence of the global systems, which may sometimes be foreign to their context. In this regard, Hyslop-Margison and Sears (2006) note that while universities in the USA are more likely to influence or shape global higher education trends,

> they are the least subject to externally-driven transformation. In contrast, universities in emerging nations are affected by the "brain drain" of key personnel and ideas, by foreign research conversations and agendas, and by the in-your-face visibility and robustness of the leading foreign institutions. (p. 2)

IMPLICATIONS FOR QUALITY AND QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Quality and quality assurance are key components of the higher education system worldwide. Although they have always been such, these concepts have gained more prominence with increasing managerialism in higher education. Chang (2006) identifies at least five aspects that characterize quality in higher education: "exception, perfection, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation" (p. 1). He argues that quality (as "fitness for purpose") is the most popular of these characteristics in the managerial higher education system. Accordingly, quality has been paired with auditing, which has been described as a sign of mistrust of institutions and academics' integrity and abilities (Madikizela-Madiya, 2018). Thus, this approach to and emphasis on quality and quality assurance came with the corporatization of higher education with the main motivation being to compete for "customers" and to draw funds from outside the institutions: "The concept of quality has therefore been used as a competitive weapon, and it results in a profit and consumerism culture" (Chang, 2006, p. 2).

Chang (2006) argues that quality as fitness for purpose considers only short-term benefits that often ignore

> diversity of learning and teaching, the gap between academics' and students' understandings of quality, and the emerging consumer culture which focuses on meeting students' needs instead of teaching students how to learn. (p. 3)

He claims that these ignored aspects of higher education are due to compliance on the indicators that are pre-determined, ignoring the fact that quality is people-oriented rather than emphasizing "objectives, documentation, and using institutional quality mechanisms to ensure standards" (p. 3).

The most important statement by Chang (2006), in relation to the argument of this chapter, is that

> the people-oriented philosophy means that management is closely linked to the workforce, and that people need to be empowered, professionalised, and given the opportunity to tackle the problems they recognise and have the skills to solve them. (p. 4)

These services are necessary for teaching, research and all academic practices in the institutions. But, is there a chance for this kind of empowerment where there is a competition for ranking?

Regarding the second aspect of quality, that of management purposes, Chang (2006) argues that it "provokes a fear that higher education institutions need to compete against each other for funding and ranking purposes, and to attract students" (p. 4). He says that this managerial quality assurance "causes insecurity and distrust towards quality evaluation among academics" (p. 4). The problem about this, Chang argues, is that

> fear will force individual institutions and academics to concentrate upon satisfying rules of quality evaluation, and treating it as a box-ticking exercise, at the expense of making a real contribution to the improvement of teaching and learning. (p. 4)

There is also quality as value for money, which Chang (2006, p. 5) argues is a neoliberal ideology that defines the relationship between students and their teachers in economic terms. In this mode of understanding of quality, students are customers that purchase products in the institutions. However, this customer–university ideology is not completely comparable to the usual business model where customers are free to choose as they want and to return if they are not satisfied with the products.

Chang (2006) argues,

> Clearly, both notions of fitness for purpose and value for money relate quality to the input and accountability from academics and higher education institutions. They emphasise institutional performance and judgement by external quality agencies, and performance is related to an institution's proficiency in having quality mechanisms in place. This approach assumes that the quality of students' learning depends on the management of academics' practice and the support and training provided by the universities. It reflects a "passive" view of quality and student learning, ignoring that learning is an individual activity and that students' interest and commitment in learning are as important as the input from academics and the university. (p. 7)

While quality has been assured through various measures in the higher education institutions, there has also been an almost counter-move to quality assurance – quantity requirement. The simultaneous demand for quality and quantity has led to enormous pressure on academics as they compete for acknowledgment, mainly through quantity in some contexts. For example, in some universities one gets promoted to a higher academic level based on the number of research outputs one produces in the shortest amount of time. In such cases, academics try by all means to find short cuts to publishing their work, a situation that has led to the development of bogus journals internationally. This pressure has been aggravated by the advent of the world rankings which create the impression that at any point in the higher education system there will be a "catching up" or similarity between and among the global institutions.

PROPOSING A SPATIAL APPROACH FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The point of departure in this chapter is the conceptual understanding of space as a product of social interactions and interrelations (or lack of these) (Massey,

2005). Thus, I propose a multiplicity framework in which the higher education system appreciates diversity and takes advantage of such to strengthen the system rather than to promote unnecessary competition, tension and inconsistency. I argue that a product of competition is quantity, while quality may be compromised in the process. There is an enormous amount of competition in higher education during this era of institutional ratings and isomorphism where competition exists at institutional and inter-institutional levels as well as at discipline and faculty levels. Institutions should be supported to develop according to their missions and goals. It is unfair and discouraging to see a university type at the bottom of a national or international ranking as compared to other universities of a different type. In countries such as South Africa, for example, the vocationally based universities can be supported to develop cutting-edge teaching resources and (if competition is necessary at all) be compared to other vocational universities, and not to the research universities.

CONCLUSION

This chapter critiques the contemporary institutional rankings and the isomorphism that they promote in response to the contemporary neoliberal culture of competition and accountability. It presents perspectives regarding these practices in terms of their implications for the quality of academic practices in different types of universities which have missions to accomplish. Various levels of competition, including university level, individual level, inter-institutional and global level have been identified and discussed to highlight their possible influence on quality in the broader higher education system. It is proposed that instead of competition for rankings and/or similarity, universities should be encouraged and supported to strengthen their uniqueness and promote their missions for diversity and multiplicity in the higher education system. By so doing, the higher education system will be viewed as a social space for interaction for diverse growth and development. Multiplicity and plurality in the higher education space, at any level, can be resourceful for quality and quality assurance rather than for competition or pressure. Isomorphism challenges quality in higher education practices through its homogenizing tendencies, particularly in relation to institutional identity development. This tendency is colonizing universities by indirectly imposing measures of practice, management and governance. Universities that are of different types cannot and should not be expected to compete in the same ranking system. Possibilities for strengthening and allowing this difference in the higher education system instead of blurring it can be explored through research and government support. If competition is at all necessary, then all conditions and circumstances should be acknowledged, and universities be compared fairly and realistically. Institutional rankings, in their present form, should not replace the university mission statements.

NOTE

1. https://www.postgrad.com/study-in-europe/european-universities/types-of-university/

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