‘Building a Reputation’
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I would like to take the opportunity here to share with you some thoughts on university rankings. University rankings are the result of attempts by various organizations, --be it governments, universities, or even popular magazines --to characterize individual universities in terms of their performance, and then rank them accordingly. The issue of world university rankings seems to me a timely one in view of the fact that our university, Erasmus University, has made a spectacular jump in the Times Higher Education (THE) magazine, the publisher of the most prestigious among the university league tables, from position 154 in the world to position 72, making Erasmus University one of the top hundred universities in the world.

My initial response was: Is this to be taken seriously? Is it possible to improve so much over the course of a year, moving ahead so much? In response to our queries, the THE staff indicated that this jump was the consequence of strong reputational growth and better information about staff-student ratio’s.

On second thought I believe that this result should be taken seriously. To explain why, I will briefly speak about the reliability of such rankings, what role they play, and what we, as a university can learn from the results.

There are three types of ranking, rankings based on research productivity and citation impact, such as the Leiden ranking of the Center for Science and Technology Studies and the Taiwan ranking, rankings based on educational excellence such as the ranking of the German Centrum fur Hochschulentwicklung in collaboration with Die Zeit, and comprehensive rankings that combine information of both, such as the THE World University Rankings. Furthermore, rankings can be distinguished based on the nature of the data they use: subjective peer nominations or objective data. In the recent past, our positions on these different rankings, and those of others, varied widely. However, recently they have begun to converge. Let me give you an example. In 2010, our rankings on the Leiden, the Taiwan and the THE rankings were 60, 70, and 157 respectively. This year they are at position 74, 70, and 72 respectively. The positions of other universities have
converged similarly over time. It seems that rankings become more reliable. We can therefore say with some confidence now that Erasmus University is in the top 75 institutions of the world.

Now that we know this, what is the use of this knowledge? The short answer is that this information is an expression of the reputation of our university. And as we know, reputation is all-important in science. It is the symbolic capital with which universities compete for the best students, the best academic staff, and the most prestigious grants. Being successful in these areas in turn fuels reputation and vice versa. Look at the following slide. On the left is a list of the European universities with the highest reputation, according to the THE ranking. On the right are universities displayed that are most successful in acquiring EU funding. One can observe a close resemblance between the two lists, indeed suggesting that reputation breeds success and success breeds reputation.

Second, international students use them. A recent study demonstrated that students seeking out a university that fits them, actually use the reputational information provided by rankings such as the THE as their primary source of information. This is somewhat to my surprise, because I would have expected students to make decisions based on information about their field of study primarily. Why would I study medicine in Cambridge, if Erasmus University has been shown to have a better medical curriculum?

Third, rankings are shaping government policy. For example, they play a part in the allocation of thousands of international scholarships in Brazil and Russia, and are instrumental in determining the international partnerships forged by Indian institutions.

Finally, how can ranking information help us do better? It can help us by showing areas of relative weakness. The THE ranking computes 13 indicators of academic quality, most of them normalized. Examples are research volume, income, and reputation; research impact in the form of citations; international and national academic staff and student ratio’s; industry income, etc. Based on these indicators scores for five areas of potential excellence are computed. Here you see the scores for these areas of both Erasmus University and Leiden University, the highest ranked Dutch university. This comparison suggests in terms of research volume, impact, and reputation, the differences between both institutions are insignificant. Erasmus University does somewhat better than its sister institution in terms of international outlook and industry income. In terms of education our university still does
definitely worse. However I have little doubt that if we continue with the innovations we have initiated in the past years, the “Nominaal is Normaal” project, “Goed uit de startblokken,” small-group teaching in many of our schools, and attempts to improve on the quality of our teachers, we will reach their level soon.

Finally rankings can show trends in our performance over the years that may be encouraging or troublesome. For instance, although Erasmus University has shown a stable performance in terms of its citation impact, we are clearly losing ground, because other universities are improving. It suggests that we have to intensify attempts to improve the quality of our research through selective funding like we do with the SOC-funds; at least if we wish to be part of this race between world universities, competing for the best students, the best academics, the largest funds.