

06.7.2025

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Title

Correction to: Ratings, rankings, research evaluation : how do Schools of Education behave strategically within stratified UK higher education? / Marcelo Marques ; Justin J. W. Powell

Publication year

2020

Source/Footnote

In: Higher education. - 79 (2020) 5, S. 847

Inventory number

49445

Keywords

Ausland : Großbritannien : Hochschulwesen allgemein ; Ausland : Großbritannien : Forschung, Hochschullehrer ; Hochschule : Wettbewerb ; Evaluation

Abstract

While higher education research has paid considerable attention to the impact of both ratings and rankings on universities, less attention has been devoted to how university subunits, such as Schools of Education, are affected by such performance measurements. Anchored in a neo-institutional approach, we analyze the formation of a competitive institutional environment in UK higher education in which ratings and rankings assume a central position in promoting competition among Schools of Education (SoE). We apply the concepts of “institutional environment” and “organizational strategic actors” to the SoE to demonstrate how such university subunits articulate their qualities and respond to the institutional environment in which they are embedded—by using ratings and rankings (R&R) to compete for material and symbolical resources as well as inter-organizational and intra-organizational legitimacy. Through findings from 22 in-depth expert interviews with members of the multidisciplinary field of education and a content analysis of websites

06.7.2025

(n=75) of SoE that participated in REF 2014, we examine the stratified environment in which SoE are embedded (1). We uncover how R&R are applied by SoE within this competitive, marketized higher education system (2). Finally, we indicate the strategic behaviors that have been triggered by the rise of R&R in a country with a highly formalized and standardized research evaluation system (3). The results show both homogenization and differentiation among SoE in their use of organizational vocabulary and the applications of R&R while simultaneously revealing strategic behavior, ranging from changes in internal practices to changes in organizational structures. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)