CESAER

Design Principles for European Higher Education Sector Observatory

Position dated 27 June 2022

The leading universities of science & technology united in CESAER welcome the initiative for a European Higher Education Sector Observatory as proposed by the European Commission in its communication on a European strategy for universities and solidified with the Council conclusions from 5 April 2022.

Our association and our Members continue to engage to better understand and advocate the approaches and metrics used for ranking, benchmarking and assessing higher education institutions to enable fair and reasonable performance analysis reflecting the strengths and challenges of our Members. Our white paper 'Next Generation Metrics' (2020) is a key document in this respect.

With this position, we present five design principles to feed into the study guiding the observatory's evolution and its design and development, i.e. (i) establish a European Classification for Higher Education Institutions, (ii) ensure a global scope and coverage, (iii) bring together relevant data, including turnover in EU funding programmes, (iv) allow for continuous methodological co-creation and advancement together with universities and their networks, and (v) provide ample and sophisticated opportunities for benchmarking.

Principle 1: Establish a European Classification for Higher Education Institutions

Whilst we are aware that the observatory carries potential for integrating data from ranking agencies and other sources, the observatory in our view should not become a 'ranking of rankings' or yet another league table. Instead, we encourage the European Commission to design and implement the observatory as a classification building upon the important methodological work of consecutive Classifying European Institutions for Higher Education (CEIHE) projects and as implemented in U-Multirank. Such a classification should provide both transparency as well as relevant information for students (recruitment and choice for study); higher education institutions (benchmarking, consortia forming and institutional development strategies); researchers (advanced methodological and analytical tool); governments at all levels (evidence-based policy making); and the broader public, including business & industry and parents (enhanced systemic and institutional transparency and accountability).

- ➢ We call for the observatory to establish a European Classification for Higher Education Institutions (ECHEI).
- ➢ We urge the European Commission to integrate U-Multirank, the Commission's existing benchmarking tool, fully in the observatory to continue this valuable tool and to avoid duplication of efforts and a fragmented benchmarking landscape.

Principle 2: Ensure a global scope and coverage

Recalling our plea to adopt a global perspective from our positions 'Go beyond resilience to tackle local and global challenges' and 'Guiding principles for the Global Framework for S&T Cooperation', we point out that a coverage of only higher education institutions in the EU will render the observatory irrelevant. Benchmarking European higher education institutions with global peer institutions is a must.

- ➢ The observatory should include all higher education institutions from the European Higher Education Area.
- ➢ The observatory should include at least all of the institutions from outside Europe currently included in U-Multirank and seek to include all relevant global peer institutions.
- ➢ We encourage the European Commission to position the ECHEI as a global reference and design and develop this observatory in close cooperation with the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation & Development and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

Principle 3: Bring together relevant data, including turnover in EU funding programmes

We advocate to include a range and scope of relevant existing data for inclusion in the observatory. In our view, key sources of data include but are not limited to U-Multirank, Shanghai Rankings, QS World University Rankings, various Times Higher Education (THE) rankings, the European University Association's (EUA) Public Funding Observatory, Eurostat, the European Tertiary Education Register (ETER), SCOPUS, Web of Science, CWTS Leiden Ranking, Unpaywall, and SciVal.

- ➢ We insist on including data on coordination, participation and turnover data from EU funding programmes to be included in the observatory's datasets, including but not necessarily limited to Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe. It makes also sense to integrate other data such as Erasmus+ student and staff mobility. The Horizon Dashboard and the Erasmus+ project results platform thus are interesting tools to integrate.
- ➢ The observatory should be designed around the FAIR principles as foundational to enable interoperability and reuse of digital assets. Sufficient care and effort must be invested in aligning and connecting the different data during the design and development of the observatory as this will save significant time for 'users' in their daily work once the observatory is operational.

Principle 4: Allow for continuous methodological co-creation and advancement together with universities and their networks

Acknowledging the need to keep administrative burdens for institutions limited, we do point out the major developments and challenges to higher education institutions, such as the grand local and global challenges of our times, digitalisation, changed geopolitical world order and changing and more complex expectation patterns for universities.

- ➢ We advise the observatory to be formative and transformative in nature with the aim of advancing knowledge societies in Europe and beyond for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable future.
- ➢ The observatory should not be limited to the *status quo* of classifying higher education institutions and encourage and allow for continuous methodological co-creation and advancement together with universities and their networks.

Principle 5: Provide ample and sophisticated opportunities for benchmarking

Although we appreciate the ambition for the observatory being a 'one stop shop', we encourage a well-considered, balanced approach to ensure that the observatory is suitable and relevant for a range of audiences.

- ➢ We advise to implement targeted portals within the observatory for (i) higher education institutions; (ii) students; (iii) governments and other policymakers, and (iv) the broader public.
- ➢ We urge the inclusion of functionality where institutions can consent and share data at the institutional level allowing for supporting interinstitutional and transnational cooperation, benchmarking and institutional development paths.
- ➢ Including and improving U-Multirank's institutional benchmarking tool is key for the observatory's attractiveness allowing institutions to benchmark by viewing their own data, as well as data from their partners where consented and appropriate.

Our offer

Recalling the strong commitments and long-standing efforts of our Members and our association in advancing the European and global dimensions and contributions of research, education and innovation, we offer our expertise and cooperation as a key partner for developing the European Higher Education Sector Observatory and the associated upcoming work on its design, implementation and evolution.

For more information and enquiries, please contact the Chair of our Task Force Benchmark Peter Elspass or our Deputy Secretary General Mattias Björnmalm.

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CESAER is the European association of leading specialised and comprehensive universities of science and technology that: champion excellence in higher education, training, R&I; influence debate; contribute to the realisation of open knowledge societies; and, deliver significant scientific, social, economic, and societal impact.