A Glimpse of the 3Rs Workshop

On May 10th, the University Camilo José Cela was pleased to host the international workshop *The 3Rs of the future in Higher Education: Reputation, Responsibility and Ranking*. It was conceived to foster real dialogue and interaction by gathering experts from diverse fields to exchange opinion and points of view on topics like excellence, quality assurance and social responsibility.

The workshop was divided in 4 main areas:

1. Rankings and their influence in molding universities, decision-making and regulation
2. The role of accreditation and quality assurance agencies: changes and challenges
3. Social and responsible entities: thinking and growing in a sustainable mode
4. Reputation in Higher Education: perceptions and experiences from stakeholders

Throughout the day, the concept of reputation was revisited from different perspectives while assessing the extent of the impact each of the areas and their activity had on a university’s reputation.

We had the honour of hosting experts from a wide range of sectors: from universities to quality assurance agencies and rankings, public administration, headhunters, consultants, experts in social responsibility, etc.; everybody had the opportunity to contribute to the debate.

It was, undoubtedly, an intense and busy day that left many questions unanswered, which will probably (and hopefully) be picked up in future gatherings.
Rankings and their influence in molding universities, decision-making and regulation

The starting point of the panel discussion was that rankings are here to stay. Actually, rankings have shaken up the Higher Education system as they have forced universities to examine themselves and rethink some of their practices with transparency in mind. In some other cases, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have tried to adapt their strategies to get a better picture of themselves in the rankings, compromising their very essence in the process. As some of the members of this panel stated, the goal of the university should not be its ranking place. The main purpose of a university must be to do research, to teach and to make the world a better place. Under no circumstances, should a university compromise its mission, vision, strategic policy or model of value contribution.

The current disparity among universities competing to be in the top ranking positions was also highlighted during the panel discussion. This disparity comes in many shapes; for instance, type of institution (whether it is public or private), amount and type of funding they receive, number of enrolled students, etc. All these variables make it virtually impossible to stand out among so many renowned universities. One idea that surfaced was that universities should be compared only to their peers, not to all universities that take part in the ranking, since comparing universities that are fundamentally incomparable provides an unrealistic image.

Nonetheless, rankings have their own limitations. For instance, they offer a simplistic view of the university, as many intangible factors are not included as indicators, partly due to the difficulty in measuring them. In this respect, it was acknowledged during the panel discussion that the picture of a university provided by a ranking is not its whole image, but a mere snapshot of the institution’s reality. Additionally, it was agreed that there is an underlying problem when looking at this picture: stakeholders (and universities themselves) often misinterpret the information provided by rankings, and the rankings bodies themselves are aware that the intended message is not always received. For universities, this is a big concern as they may be losing potential students due to the ‘dismissal effect’: a university is ruled out from a list of potential study choices because it does not appear among the top ones. Hence, it is undeniable that rankings affect the reputation of a university as they have an impact on the way the institution is perceived and the number of applications it receives.
The role of accreditation and quality assurance agencies: changes and challenges

The roundtable discussion on accreditation and quality assurance agencies was preceded by an exhaustive comparison between two very opposite agents: rankings and Quality Assurance Agencies (QAA). There is little doubt that QAA and rankings have fundamentally different purposes. However, they each contribute to the image of a university and its reputation in their own way: whilst rankings highlight the top universities based on a set of indicators, QA establishes a set of quality related minimum standards.

In this respect, quality assurance agencies aim to build trust among all stakeholders by setting a common ground on quality for all degrees at a national level. As the members of the panel made very clear, their activity does not focus on making distinctions between institutions. On the contrary, they work to provide a protection framework for consumers as the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is built on the premise that every degree has similar minimum quality standards regardless of the country in which the programme is studied.

Nonetheless, both agencies and universities acknowledge that there is room for improvement. For instance, there is a need from universities to distinguish themselves from other education institutions as competition among HEIs is fierce. Excellence is a widespread concept among the HE actors. Clearly, universities seek excellence in their daily activities. Agencies themselves have already expressed their wish to adapt and contribute to support excellence in Higher Education, despite the difficulty involved in going beyond standards. In fact, some agencies are already looking into areas that are not usually covered during the accreditation process (like student’s experience) and that are of great importance for universities, as their image and reputation might be severely affected by a negative outcome.

In addition, two main ideas stood out during the debate. First, that communication is paramount between agencies and the universities they work with. In relation to this, it was pointed out that it would be very positive for changes in agencies to come about as a result of dialogue between QAA and universities. The second focused on the idea that universities should not just tick the boxes when an accreditation process is on the horizon. Instead, universities should acknowledge the need for a culture of continuous improvement in their institutions.
Social and responsible entities: thinking and growing in a sustainable mode

The concept of social responsibility is not new in the academic world; in fact, it is becoming an increasingly relevant factor as its influence on the reputation of a university is obvious. However, as pointed out during the panel discussion, HEIs cannot turn to the traditional Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) for guidance, mainly because the university cannot aspire to be a company; it is an organisation but not a company. Additionally, the business sector has proven that taking CSR actions does not guarantee reputational success nowadays, so there is no point in copying the business model and adapting it to the educational world.

Universities have evolved; they are no longer teaching institutions. Nowadays, universities are organisations that are constantly learning and cooperatively and co-creatively building themselves up to cause impact on their local and regional environment. Obviously, their primary mission is still to shape future professionals. However, providing academic knowledge is just not enough. Employers have started to look out for candidates with a holistic education (vs a purely academic education): graduates with a clear intent to be change makers and with the capacity to identify themselves as such. Therefore, universities must also educate in values such as equity, solidarity and plurality. Education in values is in itself an example of what University Social Responsibility (USR) really is.

Indeed, USR offers many possibilities and its impact on reputation is notorious. However, universities are not focusing their efforts on attracting students through their USR policies. Surprisingly, students are actively expressing their concerns regarding university policies on social responsibility.

Another idea that was highlighted during the panel is the fact that an institution needs to be inspiring. If a student perceives their university as inspiring, they will feel a stronger sense of belonging. The deeper the sense of belonging, the greater the impact on their perception of the institution, and consequently, its reputation will be. This sense of belonging is promoted through activities of Social Responsibility.
Reputation in higher education: perceptions and experiences from stakeholders

The last topic of the day was reputation. It was in fact the main topic of the whole workshop, as each of the areas were specifically addressed to answer the question of how reputation is built and how the activity from rankings, quality assurance agencies and social responsibility leaves its mark on the image of a university.

One of the most enlightening thoughts shared during this session was the idea that university reputation per se is not a key driver for employers and that they prioritise past experiences, along with their relationship with the particular university, over its reputation itself. This is truly insightful as we can extract two conclusions from this idea. First, reputation is everywhere, in each and every action taken by any member of the community. A good relationship with an employer might not entail an immediate response but it may eventually result in a better perception of the institution image. Secondly, reputation for each stakeholder is different and the university must adapt its actions to each group without neglecting its reputation strategy, which must be coherent and consistent.

So, if university reputation is not a key driver, what is? During the keynote speech and the panel discussion, it was stated that soft skills are becoming a decisive factor for employers when hiring, along with the candidate's degree. The importance of soft skills is closely linked to the idea that we can only guess the kind of jobs that will be needed in the future. Indeed, companies are rapidly changing and the university as an education institution is incapable of adapting to these new demands, in a purely academic sense, fast enough. In fact, universities have an interesting opportunity here as they can build their own brand based on soft skills. Thus, employers will know that a graduate student from a given university will have a set of particular cross-curricular soft skills. Nonetheless, in order to achieve such a scenario, it is paramount that the link between the university and the company tighten: companies often complain that their needs are not heard. By getting closer and listening to what companies have to say, universities will be able to better meet their requirements and provide students with the abilities and skills that employers are looking for.

It is very clear that building one's reputation is not a quick process. However, it is faster nowadays that it was in the past, mainly due to technological developments. Social media enables us to reach a wider audience and it provides this audience with a tool to contribute to our reputation, be it negatively or positively. One of the main features of the concept of reputation is that it cannot be controlled. An organisation can work on its reputation through different actions in order to transmit its message. However, actions will only get them so far. The notion of reputation is closely connected with how reality is perceived and interpreted. If an institution fails to communicate their actions, or if the message is misinterpreted, the institution's reputation will suffer, no matter how committed that organization may be.