

## **Boycott! German Sociologists Refuse to Participate in Academic Ranking by Klaus Dörre, Stephan Lessenich, and Ingo Singe, Friedrich-Schiller-University of Jena Germany**

Universities and institutions of higher education across the globe are being impacted by structural change, guided by principles of the entrepreneurial university. The imposition of New Public Management principles means that universities are increasingly being managed like private enterprises. Resources are being allocated according to performance records and target agreements. Academic capitalism has entered Germany, and its main instruments are university department rankings and league tables. The downside is an academic routine biased towards quantitative performance indicators (research funding, number of doctorates and graduates) and a neglect of qualitative criteria. Work in academia has changed fundamentally in both design and content. Teaching and research are increasingly being obstructed by the growth of administrative responsibilities. There is a logic of escalation inherent in performance measurement exercises (“more and more and never enough”), resulting in work intensification, stress and overload amongst all groups of the academic workforce. Negative effects on the quality of research and teaching are increasingly being felt.

The German Sociological Association (GSA) has therefore decided to take a stand against academic capitalism by boycotting the 2013 CHE (Center for the Development of Higher Education) ranking, which certainly is the most influential ranking in the German-speaking world. Quality in teaching and research, the reputation of scholars, scientific infrastructure and international “visibility” are amongst the assessment criteria for university departments. For this purpose data (for example on third party funding) is gathered from university directorates, students are being surveyed and some professors are also being consulted. Results are published in cooperation with the highly respected weekly “Die Zeit” and certainly are a very important point of reference for university directorates as well as for the science bureaucracy.

The GSA recently called upon departments, lecturers and students not to participate in the CHE-ranking. The initiative was first taken by the Institute of Sociology at the Friedrich-Schiller-University in Jena. Having been ranked amongst the best in the league tables, the university’s sociology department used this strong position to publicly declare its non-participation. The announcement was made shortly after the results of the 2011 ranking had been published. The department’s resolution stated:

“The new 2011/12 CHE Ranking, published in *Die ZEIT*, has ranked the Institute of Sociology at the Friedrich-Schiller-University at a top position. We are pleased about this expression of appreciation of our work. However, we are deeply skeptical about the instrument of university ranking as such. We consider the information value of the CHE ranking to be low, if for only one reason, namely that a significant number of institutes have been ranked on the basis of incomplete data. First and foremost, ranking universities serves as an instrument for establishing competitive cultures in academia. It systematically produces winners and losers but does not help to improve the quality of scientific work. The Institute of Sociology therefore is planning not to take part in the next round of this competition. As already stated, we will consult with the GSA’s board and council in order to coordinate a joint approach of the discipline. On this occasion, there needs to be an exchange about appropriate instruments for assuring scientific quality and ways to provide students with information on the different sociology programs at German universities.”

The boycott, which has been widely covered in the press, has meanwhile been joined by the GSA and a majority of sociology departments in Germany. It is also being supported by other disciplines. Historians, English literary scholars, chemists, pedagogues, and political scientists have decided not to partake in the CHE ranking for the time being.

The boycott is not given unequivocal support by university managements. And the GSA has made it clear that it will not refuse performance appraisals on principle. The GSA's board thus decided in October 2012 to establish an alternative, exclusively descriptive information system for students. It has also decided to set up a working group called "*Task Force Studiengangsevaluation*" which is to discuss alternative ways to establish valid evaluation mechanisms. The boycott will enter its "hot phase" during the summer term of 2013. The coming months will show whether or not the boycott is being supported by sufficient numbers of students and scholars. Right now, the outcome is uncertain, but sociologists from Jena, and indeed Germany, are appealing to the international scientific community to follow suit and boycott rankings.

For further information please refer to [www.soziologie.de/che](http://www.soziologie.de/che)