

# Impact of University Rankings: Global Excellence vs. Local Engagement

Professor Ellen Hazelkorn  
Director, Research and Enterprise & Dean of the Graduate  
Research School  
Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland

Launch Workshop  
OECD/IMHE Reviews of Higher Education in Regional  
Development, 2008-2010  
September 2008



## Themes

1. Global Rankings and Competitiveness
2. Impact of Rankings on Higher Education and its Stakeholders
3. Building a World Class City Region

# 1. Global Rankings and Competitiveness

## Rankings and the Knowledge Economy

- Knowledge has become the foundation of economic growth, social development, and national competitiveness.
- If higher education is the engine of the economy, then the global status of HEIs becomes a vital indicator.
- But many OECD countries face sharp demographic shifts evidenced by the greying of population and a decline in PhD graduates.
- Countries with high levels of international students benefit from the contribution they make to domestic research and development' (OECD, 2007, p34).
- Global competition is reflected in the rising significance and popularity of rankings which attempt to measure the knowledge-producing and talent-catching capacity of HEIs.

## Why Rankings?

- Satisfy a 'public demand for transparency and information that institutions and government have not been able to meet on their own.' (Usher & Savino, 2006, p38)
  - Cue to consumers re: conversion potential for occupational & graduate school attainment
  - Cue to employers what they can expect from graduates
  - Cue to government/policymakers regarding international standards & economic credibility – and investor confidence
  - Cue to public because they are perceived as independent of the sector or individual universities

## What do Rankings Measure?

- Global rankings focus primarily on research
  - SJT = 80%
  - Times QS = 60% + teaching and internationalisation
- Global rankings compare complex HEIs using a single set of indicators, *but*
  - Is there a single definition of Quality/Excellence?
  - Institutions have different goals and missions: can one-size-fit-all?
  - What about the quality of teaching, regional engagement, innovation, social and economic impact?
  - Is there a correlation between teaching quality and research assessment?
- 'Which university is best' can be asked differently depending upon who is asking.

## 2. Impact of Rankings on Higher Education and its Stakeholders

### Rising Importance of Rankings for HE

- Growing international interest in rankings:
  - Rankings play critical role in maintaining/building HE reputation, status and prestige,
  - Can enhance visibility and brand,
  - Rankings used as indicator of quality and excellence,
- Despite criticism and concern with methodology, use rankings when positive for publicity/promotion.
- HEIs particularly sensitive to student choice – and influence and incentivise HE behaviour.
- Rank influences student recruitment, employers, global partnerships, and philanthropy.

## Impact of Rankings on Students

- Marketisation of HE has transformed students in savvy consumers, customers or clients.
- High achievers and international postgraduate students are especially receptive:
  - Professional fields (e.g. medicine, business, law) or an academic career.
  - Students able to pay full fee – free to choose – more likely to attend higher ranked HEIs.
- Institutional rank transmits social and cultural capital which resonates with family, friends and potential employers.
  - Important for students seeking employment in home country.

## Impact on Other Stakeholders

- Employers use rankings to short-list best graduates – attracted to high-ranked institutions
  - SME's and local employers have implicit ranking based on own experience.
  - Large and professional businesses tend to be more 'systematic'.
- Sponsors/benefactors use rankings to help select opportunities.
- Public Opinion can be vital agenda-setting instrument
  - Discussion in media can provide focal point for public to pay attention to higher education.
  - Audience includes those who have (in)direct influence on financial resources, tuition policy, institutional mission and profile.

## Influence on Government

- Rankings seen as measuring national competitiveness and expression of national pride and ambition
  - Especially influenced by SJT, even beyond HE, e.g. emigration policy.
  - Often expressed by number of HEIs in top 20, 50 or 100.
  - High-ranked HEIs seen as trophy universities.
  - Used to attract foreign investment.
- National excellence initiatives = response to rankings and are used/perceived as a ranking.
- Pace of reform quickening as governments believe reform will lead to more competitive and better (more highly ranked) HEIs.

## Impact on Higher Education

- Rankings used to benchmark performance, set strategic goals and KPIs, and aid resource allocation.
  - Supports modernisation agenda, strategic planning and QA,
  - ~50% use their rank for publicity/marketing purposes.
- Strategic decisions and capacity-building
  - Highlight reputation, expertise and 'talent-catching' capabilities,
  - Build upon niche research expertise,
  - Improve global reach via international alliances & partnerships,
  - Strengthen internationalisation strategy,
  - Monitor peers worldwide.

### 3. Building a World Class City Region

#### Restructuring Global HE systems

- Research now conducted in partnership with other institutions and organisations (public and private).
- Connected regionally, nationally and globally – simultaneously.
  - National boundaries declining in significance
  - Research now conducted via bi-lateral, inter-regional and global networks of research co-operation.
  - Growing importance of global HE networks
    - Lisbon Agreement/EHEA and ERA.
- Worldwide comparisons more significant in the future.
  - 'National pre-eminence is no longer enough'
- Competition between global knowledge city regions
  - Serve as organising nodes of global economy
  - Implications for all, esp. developing economies/societies

## What is a world-class HE system?

- Diverse and coherent set of high performing, globally-focused institutions and student experiences:
  - Scale and quality of graduates to provide for desired societal and economic outcomes;
  - Research base for creation of knowledge to fuel innovation and forge/attract international links.
- Excellence across diverse fields of activity:
  - Research across the full RDI spectrum,
  - Teaching & learning,
  - Regional and community engagement,
  - Social and economic impact.
- Developing competences to operate *proactively* as a global agent.

## Global Excellence & Local Engagement

- Strategically position region as measured by flows of people, knowledge and ideas;
- HEIs embedded in intellectual, cultural and innovative infrastructure of the region;
- Maximise capabilities of individual organisations via regional/national collaboration and global partnerships:
  - Contribute to regional innovation,
  - Elevate status on the global research landscape,
  - Attract investment.
- Use metrics and rankings, appropriate to various customers/consumers, to benchmark competitiveness against peer regions.
- Highlight attributes of world class HE *system* as component of knowledge intensive sector & investment strategy.

## Choices

- Focus on activities which perform best in rankings Vs. Identify and develop distinctive profile?
- Concentrate resources in few 'centres of excellence' Vs. Support excellence wherever it exists?
- Rely on own research capacity Vs. Forge collaboration and network with sites of relatively strong research capacity and/or resources
- Recruit students from local area Vs. Develop strategy to attract 'talent' from outside region and internationally?
- Launch public information campaign about HE excellence Vs. Allow media to provide information?
- Invest in a world class university Vs. Develop a world class *system*?

ellen.hazelkorn@dit.ie

<http://www.oecd.org/edu/imhe/rankings>