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# BREAKING RANKS: ASSESSING QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

## The ranks' progress

A few years ago, the head of a university in Germany was asked by an educational organisation whether he would like the university to be included in a league table. "Definitely not" was his answer. When he was finally reassured that his university would not be included, he asked – merely out of curiosity - where it *would have been* ranked compared to others.

The story illustrates the ambivalence of universities towards rankings. Come out on top, and your success is bound to breed further success; slide into the lower ranks, and potential students go elsewhere.

But do rankings, in fact, measure what they claim to measure? Are they doing more harm than good? These were among the questions raised at the OECD/IMHE General Conference "Higher education: quality, relevance and impact" held on 8-10 September in Paris. 330 participants from 53 different countries attended the conference, one of the largest in the history of IMHE.

## Strait is the gate

A single number cannot encapsulate all the elements of higher education. The two most popular international rankings, the Shanghai Jiao Tong University Ranking (SJT) and the Times Higher Education Supplement – Quacquarelli Symons Marketing (THES-QS) have been criticized for giving too much weight to research, scholarly publications and citation rates in professional journals, and not enough to teaching and learning. "Research is sexy," said a respondent to an international survey conducted by conference speaker Ellen Hazelkorn, Director of the Dublin Institute of Technology. "Reputation, unfortunately, is always based on research, and research attracts the best talent." One reason for seizing on research, especially scientific research, as an indicator is that it is easier to measure. Compared to the thousands of scientific articles appearing in *Nature* or the *British Medical Journal* only 5% of humanities research is published in article form; the rest is in books. Scientific prowess is also a measure of global competitiveness. As one respondent in Professor Hazelkorn's survey admitted, "the easiest way to boost rankings is to kill the humanities".

As for arguments that the natural sciences are more relevant than the humanities, Robert Berdahl, President of the Association of American Universities, doubted that the problems of contemporary society – migration, aging, climate change, the legacies of colonialism and religious extremism – could be solved by the natural sciences alone.

The SJT gives a 40% weighting to research and another 40% to high-profile faculty, those who have won Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals, while the THES-QS gives each of these indicators a more modest 20% ranking, but places 40% on peer review, a category not even included in the SJT. The variability of these weightings suggests the lack of a sound theoretical basis; they merely reflect the view of the publisher. Even if the data is valid, it tends to be misinterpreted. The SJT cautions against using its

tables as an overall assessment of a university, but of course that is exactly what people do.

While there is no proof that a Nobel Prize winner on campus benefits students, there is plenty that prestige does, certainly in terms of career opportunities. How can a university gain prestige? The best way is by already having it.

Older, pre-1920s universities are consistently ranked as the best in the world. They attract high-calibre students and faculty, and receive generous funding. Few universities can compete with Harvard or Cambridge and most would never attempt the feat. But league tables leave them little choice. Universities are plucked from their context and scrutinized without regard for the historical, cultural and economic factors affecting performance.

In 2006, the IMHE and the International Association of Universities (IAU) launched a study to evaluate both the positive and negative impacts of rankings on university administrators, faculty and students. The study, now in its second phase, has shifted the focus to institutions in countries where policies promoting educational excellence have only recently been adopted, and where the pressure of rankings is just beginning to be felt.

Rankings fail to do justice to the unique mission of each university. But while many universities deplore them, some 50% do not hesitate to use them for publicity and marketing. A miasma of competition surrounds rankings. Vice-Chancellors, picking up the scent, cut programmes, reorient missions or seek mergers with higher-ranking institutions. Conversely, those higher up jealously guard their hard-won reputations and shy away from collaboration with anyone but their peers. Unbridled competition will induce copycat behaviour among universities unless policy encourages diversity.

## Turning the tables

Some universities exploit a particular indicator to hoist themselves higher in the ranks. A favourite is to encourage more applications because it lets a university be more selective in choosing students, and tighter selectivity is often seen as a sign of quality. A university may also use its lower position as a marketing strategy. Immigration is a new selling point among the less prestigious Australian universities. In Australia, 19.3% of the student body is international, well above the OECD average of 6.7%; in some universities it is 50%. According to Andrys Onsman, Academic Co-ordinator at Monash University, an article in the *Times of India* reported that many Indian students applied to the University of Ballarat because it was easier to earn a degree there than in higher ranked universities, while scoring the same number of immigration points.

Such strategies only mask the desperation of university administrators and have little or nothing to do with education. Teaching and learning get far less attention than they should, and indicators like "teacher/student ratio" reveal nothing about a teacher's ability to teach or a student's capacity to learn.

An assessment is only as good as its data. Too often, data is scarce or has never been collected. If further data does become available, however, a university may be nervous about divulging it for fear of harming its reputation. Like success, failure tends to reproduce itself.

### New measures

One alternative is to let students compile their own league tables. Speaker Gero Federkeil, Programme Manager of the Centre for Higher Education (CHE) in Germany, said that the CHE publishes data from which students can construct their own rankings, depending on their needs. The CHE "clusters" universities instead of ranking them. They are not stamped with a number but categorized as "good", "medium" or "bad", and listed alphabetically. Universities in one cluster are of comparable quality, whereas those in different clusters show a marked difference. Clustering avoids exaggerating marginal differences of a perhaps trivial nature, creating the false impression that one university is clearly better than another.

Another indicator is the student's overall competence. Methodologies like the OECD's Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) separate a student's education into different strands, including "disciplinary" and "generic skills". Generic skills might include "abstract thinking", "ability to apply knowledge in practical situations" or "ability to work in a group."

### A+ universities for B students

AHELO includes a "value-added" strand. Complaints abound that rankings focus too much on "input" and not enough on "output", in other words, on student admissions rather than what a graduate has learned and can apply. Top universities draw A+ students, as one would expect; it is no surprise if they yield A+ graduates. But what of universities that accept B students and produce A-level graduates? The added value of the B-student's degree programme could be considered higher than that offered by the top university.

Even with new measures, questions remain as to whether comparative assessments are possible between countries where culture, language, and political systems differ radically. AHELO attempts to identify criteria that could serve as universal benchmarks of quality. When the study concludes in 2010, the result will be the most comprehensive overview of learning assessments thus far attained.

### Begging to differ

As students and faculty become more international and mobile, universities struggle to adapt. For good or for ill, the American university is the standard model on which other universities mould their programmes. This convergence allows for a fairer comparison of degrees and facilitates student mobility through a seamless transfer of credits and the ease by which students can enrol in foreign masters and PhD programmes. But convergence has its limits, especially when it conflicts with social norms. The principle of selectivity, the bedrock of American higher education, runs counter to the educational philosophy of many European and Latin American countries where higher education should be available to all. The danger is in sacrificing one value to save the other.

The proverb "chase two hares and you'll lose both" sums up what Vice-Chancellors feel if compelled to make between convergence and diversity. The dilemma arises from a misunderstanding, of which the early Bologna Process was a victim. Dirk Van Damme, head of the OECD's Centre for Education Research Innovation (CERI), pointed out the aim of Bologna is not the convergence of curricula, but of learning outcomes. It is up to universities to demonstrate how they achieve these outcomes.

### Through a glass darkly

Most agree that ranking methodologies would improve with greater transparency, but not everyone. Institutions with gold leaf reputations – the Oxbridges and Ivy Leaguers – benefit little from transparency. It is the mid-ranked universities that have the most to gain, or to lose. Without transparency, prospective students enter what Dr. Van Damme called a "bazaar of undemonstrated reputations" rather than a system based on evidence of superior learning outcomes.

The advent of mass higher education in the 1980s resulted from the explosion in technology which required new skills to master it. Getting a good job meant – and still means – getting a good degree. Providing greater access to higher education placed a new burden on national budgets, forcing governments to pursue policies of quality assurance and accountability. Today's global economy compels governments to look in two directions: towards a labour market increasingly dependent on technical competence and to an international "arms race" in research. In Europe, the Bologna Process is an example of a programme aimed at improving the quality of education for all; the Lisbon Process is designed to hone a nation's competitive edge by nurturing champions.

### Beyond the walls

More people enter higher education than ever before in history. Some 135 million students are enrolled in postsecondary education. According to the OECD's *Education at a Glance*, published in September, enrolment has doubled in the last ten years.

Students, faculty and administrators are not the only stakeholders. Public investment in higher education averages 1% of GDP in OECD countries. Speaker Wendy Purcell of the University of Plymouth in the United Kingdom estimated that universities contribute close to £45 billion (56€ billion) annually to the nation's economy and employ over 600,000 people. They also help build communities. Sixty-two percent of graduates in the northwest of the UK live and work in the region where they graduated. University rankings do not reflect these hidden contributions. This is a dangerous oversight, for it leaves universities vulnerable in ranking systems that disregard everything except a narrow range of indicators.

In September, the OECD entered Phase II of a comparative review of the regional impact and engagement of higher education. This phase will focus on city regions, the G8 and those countries which are on the road to OECD accession. It will include a High-Level Global Roundtable in 2009 and a final synthesis report, which will be published in 2010.

The flow of knowledge drives modern society, and technologies such as the Internet have turned that flow into a torrent. Traditional higher education, symbolised by the ivory tower, thrives on status nurtured by the idea of exclusivity, such as a highly selective student body. What speaker Simon Marginson from the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne in Australia called the "open source ecology" is laying siege to this conception by making knowledge "hyper-abundant, with the potential of limitless dissemination". This sudden, expanded availability of knowledge raises the stakes in its acquisition and use. Higher education must adapt. Dusty league tables are not going to disappear, but finer instruments will complement them. Today's stewards of higher education are plucking the ivy from the tower walls and cultivating it wherever it takes root.

Lyndon Thompson

For more information on the 2008 General Conference :  
[www.oecd.org/edu/imhegeneralconference2008](http://www.oecd.org/edu/imhegeneralconference2008)

The IMHE welcomes the following new members:

- > University of Melbourne – L.H. Martin Institute – Australia
- > BMWF Bundesministeriums für Wissenschaft und Forschung - Vienna – Austria
- > Association of Caribbean Tertiary Institutions – Barbados
- > Universidade Estadual de Campinas (UNICAMP) – Brazil
- > National Chengchi University – Chinese Taipei
- > Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja – Ecuador
- > Technological Education Institute of Larissa – Greece
- > Technological Education Institute of Crete – Greece
- > Ministry of Education, Culture and Science – The Netherlands
- > Universitat Jaume I – Spain
- > University of Leeds – United Kingdom
- > University of Nottingham – United Kingdom
- > University of Plymouth – United Kingdom
- > University of Sunderland – United Kingdom
- > Educational Policy Institute – United States
- > University at Albany – Unites States

## HOW TO IMPROVE QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A STUDY OF INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGIES

For almost a year now IMHE has been studying the issue of quality in higher education. This study aims at gathering and analyzing case-studies of policies implemented at the institutional level in order to improve quality in higher education.

The study first focused on a literature review on teaching practices and quality in higher education. Based on this literature review a dedicated working group met in January in order to prepare an online questionnaire designed for collecting data on institutional strategies to improve quality in higher education. The initial results as well as data from a series of telephone interviews and site visits were presented at the IMHE General Conference in September 2008.



Copenhagen Business School.

28 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) accepted to take part in the study, thus allowing for sufficient geographic and institutional diversity. A total of 46 initiatives to improve teaching quality in higher education were presented (mostly training assessments, teacher training sessions, and policies supporting better teaching practices). Data cross-analysis enabled the working group to classify

initiatives, overall trends (focusing on comprehensive initiatives rather than occasional measures), possible causal links (e.g. the relation between the specific context of HEIs and the success vs. failure of the initiatives) as well as innovative policies.

A more in-depth analysis will attempt to explain these observations by identifying the implementation factors for institutional initiatives. The purpose is to understand drivers and barriers for strategies to improve quality in higher education but also to serve as a base for comparative analysis in order to support HEIs' efforts. All comments and results from the study will be presented on December 15, 2008 at a joint IMHE/Open University of Catalonia (UOC) dedicated meeting including all participants in the project. The final report is expected early 2009.

## NO MORE IVORY TOWERS

### NEW PHASE OF REVIEWS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT STARTS

Globalisation has far reaching implications for cities and regions. The competitive advantage of the regions that create the best conditions for growth and development is increasing and the gaps between the regions are growing. In fact, the variation in economic performance is much wider across regions than across countries.

Between 2001 and 2006, about half of the overall growth in employment in the 30 OECD countries occurred in only 5% of the regions. Imitation and adaptation are no longer sufficient strategies in regional and city development. Universities can help cities and regions become more innovative and competitive.

Reviews of higher education in regional development are OECD's vehicle to

mobilise higher education for regional and city development. They were launched in 2004 by IMHE to make higher education institutions more open, active and responsive. In 2005-07, fourteen regions were reviewed in twelve countries.

The new set of OECD reviews in 2009-10 is reaching out to the G8 countries and rapidly developing economies. Two regions in the United States – Southern Arizona and the Paso del Norte Region, a cross-border region with Mexico – have already signed up for the reviews. There are also regions in Chile (Bío Bío Region), Brazil (Campinas), Mexico (State of Veracruz), Malaysia (Penang) and Israel (the Galilee) that will participate in the reviews, as well as European regions and city regions including Amsterdam, Andalucía, Berlin, Lombardia and Rotterdam.

Each region will conduct a self-evaluation process following OECD guidelines. An important step is to establish a regional steering committee of representatives from the higher education institutions and public and private sectors to oversee the review process and "take ownership" of the self-evaluation report. An international team of experts will visit the region and will bring together their findings and recommendations in review reports.

For more information, see  
[www.oecd.org/edu/higher/regionaldevelopment](http://www.oecd.org/edu/higher/regionaldevelopment)  
 or contact: [Jaana.Puukka@oecd.org](mailto:Jaana.Puukka@oecd.org)

## PUBLICATIONS OF INTEREST

**Higher Education in Africa: The International Dimension**, Damtew Tefera and Jane Knight, Editors 2008 CIHE, Boston College, USA and AAU, Accra, Ghana. ISBN: 978-99-8858-940-9  
**This book documents and analyses the international dimension of higher education in Africa based on country case-studies and a consideration of relevant historical and contemporary themes. It identifies trends, developments, and challenges related to the international dimension of higher education at the institutional, national, and regional levels.**



**Higher Education to 2030 (Vol. 1): Demography**. OECD Publishing. ISBN 978-92-64-04065-6  
**What** might be the future impact of demographic changes on tertiary education systems and institutions? How can and do countries address these changes? What opportunities and challenges do they bring? Drawing on trend data and projections, this book takes an in-depth look at these important questions from both a qualitative and quantitative standpoint.

**The Global Competition for Talent: Mobility of the Highly Skilled**. OECD Publishing. ISBN: 9789264047747  
**This publication discusses the dimensions, significance, and policy implications of international flows of human resources in science**

and technology. The international mobility of highly skilled workers is increasing in scale and complexity as more economies participate in R&D and innovation activity.

**Encouraging Student Interest in Science and Technology Studies**. OECD Publishing ISBN: 9789264040694

**This publication examines overall trends in higher education enrolments and the evolution of S&T compared with other disciplines. The results suggest that although absolute numbers of S&T students have been rising as access to higher levels of education expands in OECD economies, the relative share of S&T students among the overall student population has been falling.**





**Higher Education Management and Policy, Special issue: Higher Education and Regional Development**


Vol. 20, No. 2. OECD Publishing.  
 ISBN: 9789264043190


**Questions** surrounding the local and regional impact of higher education institutions have been around for a long time, but the issues have become more focused in recent years around two poles of interest: the contribution that universities can make to the knowledge economy and the critical role that regions play in determining national economic success.


## IMHE CALENDAR

**Autumn 2009** *Global Roundtable: Universities and Regions, Kansas City, USA*. By invitation only. Date to be confirmed.  
 Contact: jaana.puukka@oecd.org

**Autumn 2009** *"What Works" on Quality Teaching*, Paris, France.  
 Contact: fabrice.henard@oecd.org

**Autumn 2009** *International Conference on Facilities for Higher Education, organised by the PEB*. Venue to be confirmed.  
 Contact : alastair.blyth@oecd.org

**13-15 Sept. 2010** *IMHE General Conference*, Paris, France  
 Contact: valerie.lafon@oecd.org

**September 2010** *Higher Education and Regions* (time and place to be confirmed).  
 Contact: jaana.puukka@oecd.org

### OTHER MEETINGS OF INTEREST

**20-22 April 2009** *IAU 3rd Global Meeting of Associations of Universities*. Guadalajara, Mexico.  
[www.unesco.org/iau/conferences/upcoming.html](http://www.unesco.org/iau/conferences/upcoming.html)

**22-24 April 2009** *CONAHEC, HACU, IOHE joint conference. An Inter-American Higher Education Collaboration: Working together to Shape the Future of our Communities*. Guadalajara, Mexico.

**23-26 August 2009** *EAIR conference. Fighting for Harmony*. Vilnius Lithuania.  
<http://www.eair.nl/>

**16-19 Sept. 2009** *21st Annual EAIE Conference*. Madrid, Spain.  
[www.eaie.org/conference/futureconferences/2009.asp](http://www.eaie.org/conference/futureconferences/2009.asp)

**5-6 November 2009** *IAU Annual Conference. The Role of Higher Education in Promoting Intercultural Dialogue and Understanding*. Beirut, Lebanon  
[www.unesco.org/iau/conferences/upcoming.html](http://www.unesco.org/iau/conferences/upcoming.html)

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