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2009-04-21

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Recommended Citation
Hazelkorn, E.(2009). Do university rankings measure what counts? *The Irish Times*, 21 April, 2009.

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Do university rankings measure what counts?

Ellen Hazelkorn

Global rankings of universities have gained new currency in Ireland in recent weeks, appearing to influence government policy on funding in higher education. Support for the current Review of Higher Education and the establishment of the TCD/UCD innovation alliance noted that 'both are the only Irish universities ranked inside the world top 200' (*The Irish Times*, 30 January and 12 March 2009). This pre-occupation with the relative standing of our universities reflects the consensus that higher education is the engine of economic growth. But are global rankings the most appropriate benchmark for shaping policy?

What do Rankings Measure?

Less than a decade ago, few people outside of the United States of America had heard of university rankings. Today national rankings exist in over 40 countries, and global rankings are mushrooming. The first, the Shanghai Jiao Tong Academic Ranking of World Universities (SJT) began in 2003. It was followed by *Webometrics* and Times QS *World University Ranking* in 2004, and the Taiwan *Performance Ranking of Scientific Papers for Research Universities* in 2007. The EU has recently announced its intention to develop a 'new multi-dimensional university ranking system with global outreach' to be piloted in 2010.

Rankings compare higher education institutions (HEIs) using a range of indicators, which are weighted differently by each ranking system. For example, the SJT focuses on research, using international indicators such as peer-reviewed publications, citations and Nobel prizes, while the Times QS balances research with peer review, student/staff ratio, and internationalisation and employer feedback.

But do rankings measure what people think they measure? Their main emphasis is on the bio-sciences with limited accuracy for social science while the humanities and arts are largely ignored. There is a heavy reliance on citations which can be easily manipulated, and whose value as a measure of impact is questionable.

Despite the major global challenges facing us, e.g. climate change, energy, human health and healthcare delivery or urban infrastructure, rankings have difficulty measuring interdisciplinary or collaborative research. Likewise, they do not recognize research which leads to new products and services, high-performance start-ups or social innovation – actions which policymakers say are critical to jump-starting Ireland's smart society. Nor do rankings measure the quality of teaching or the impact of research on teaching.

To paraphrase Einstein, global rankings focus on what is easily measured rather than measuring what counts.

What do Rankings tell us?

Around the world – and now in Ireland – governments and HEIs are using rankings as a benchmark for national or institutional ambition. International evidence shows educational and research priorities, resource allocation and student entry requirements, to name a few issues, are being altered – in some cases quite significantly – in order to affect better rankings. While rankings are focusing more attention on performance and quality, they are also distorting higher education and encouraging many to 'game' the system.

Despite the different methodologies, the same 25 universities tend to appear at or near the top in both rankings. They are distinguished by large budgets, large endowments, age, excellent staff to student ratios, and most importantly, access to large pools of highly developed human capital (staff and students). Access to the top 25, for the foreseeable future, is beyond most HEIs and nations. Estimates vary, but a 'world class' university is generally viewed as having a budget of €1.5b annually. For Ireland to develop an institution on this scale would require a 600% increase for the largest Irish university or would equate to diverting the entire higher education budget to a single institution.

Viewing the System as a Whole

Because size matters in global rankings, governments are struggling with how best to respond. It is easier to have well-performing universities in a large country than a small one. Rankings are not controlled for population size or GDP; if they were Ireland would rank 7th in the world on the Times QS according to population size and 10th for GDP, while the US would be 14th.

Interestingly, the Lisbon Council ranking of university systems (2008) compares how the system as a whole helps to meet the economic and social goals that are vital for 21st century success. Using that comparison, Ireland ranks 7th out of the 17 countries surveyed just behind the US and Sweden but substantially ahead of Germany and Switzerland.

Australia presents an alternative strategy which is worth studying not least because our government is considering copying its fees and loans system (HECS). Rather than concentrating resources in a few universities, Australia wants a world class system providing excellence across diverse fields of learning and discovery, and recognizing and rewarding excellence wherever it occurs. The Norwegian *Commission for Higher Education*, reporting in January 2008, adopted a similar stance.

How should Ireland respond?

Policy makers and the public are looking for value-for-money, especially in difficult economic circumstances. Rankings appear to provide a simple way to gauge world class status. But, measuring the wrong things can produce distortions. Even in relation to scientific research, rankings do great damage. They value some disciplines and research more than other work, and distort the focus of research towards that which is more predictable and easily measured.

Using global rankings as the benchmark only makes sense if the indicators are appropriate – otherwise, we risk transforming our higher education system to conform to metrics designed for other purposes.

Instead, Ireland would be wise to:

- Develop benchmarks which reflect our societal and innovation needs and assess performance accordingly.
- Bring R&D investment up to a minimum of 3% of GDP, in line with EU guidelines, so we can compete globally;
- Support and fund excellence wherever it occurs because it is the total investment that's important.

In this way, we can mobilise the potential of the whole Higher Education system and maximise the benefits to society at large.

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