

Research Brief for the Lay Person: Higher Education Systems

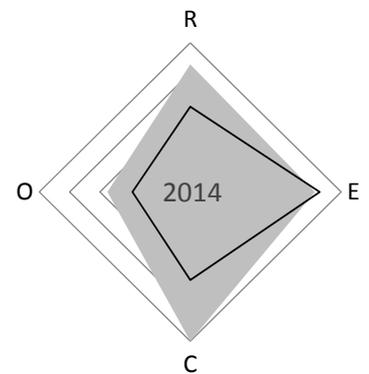
Context

Rankings in higher education are becoming increasingly popular in a world characterised by growing student mobility, global competition for talent, and competitive allocation of resources. Since the publication, in 2003, of the first world ranking of universities by the Graduate School of Education at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, much emphasis has been placed on the standing of individual institutions. Hundreds of universities throughout the world want to be in the top 50 or 100 of the major international rankings. However, it is the total contribution of the tertiary education sector to education, training and research that matters for the economic and cultural development of a nation. One university can be research intensive, while another institution might specialise in teaching and also feed capable students into graduate research programs.

My contribution

Together with [Ross Williams](#) and other colleagues from the University of Melbourne, I have produced a ranking of national systems of higher education. The aim is to move discussion from the performance of individual institutions to that of the system as a whole. This ranking evaluates the performance of higher education systems in 50 countries across four dimensions: **R**esources devoted to teaching and research; policy and regulatory characteristics of the **E**nvironment in which higher education institutions operate; **C**onnectivity with the rest of society and internationally; and measures of **O**utput. This exercise provides a map that tells governments where they rank compared with their neighbours and compared with the best-performing nations. Rankings within each module are then combined into an overall ranking, which is topped by the United States, followed by Sweden, Canada, Denmark and Finland (2014 figures).

Swiss higher education system (grey)
compared to world average (black)



Impact

This work came out of a request (and is sponsored) by Universitas 21, a worldwide network of research-intensive universities. The first release of the U21 Ranking of National Higher Education Systems in 2012 received extensive global media coverage. There were over 400 items of print, broadcast and online media coverage across the world, including the BBC and the Times Higher Education.

Ongoing research

The yearly updates of the ranking continue under the direction of Ross Williams. They are available at <http://www.universitas21.com>. I do not plan to be actively involved in this line of research in the future, although I remain interested in issues arising from the changing environment in which universities operate. Of particular interest is the impact of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) on the business model of higher education institutions and the effect of competitive allocation of research funds on scientists' incentives and productivity.

R. Williams, G. de Rassenfosse, P. Jensen and S. Marginson. 2013. The determinants of quality national higher education systems. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 35(6), 599-611.

_____ and G. de Rassenfosse. 2014. Pitfalls in aggregating performance measures in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, forthcoming.