

# Universities have become isolated from their publics

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Ellen Hazelkorn 12 May 2017 Issue No:459

The history of rankings stretches back to the late 19th century, but it is the intensification of globalisation that has been the most powerful force and explanation for their emergence and success since the turn of the millennium.

Today, as the distribution of economic activity and scientific collaboration has become increasingly international, higher education has been transformed from a local institution into a global actor. It sits at the fulcrum of the geopolitical struggle for a greater share of the global market and the new world-order, facilitating increasing concentrations of wealth and resources and greater hierarchical differentiation and social stratification.

## Changing relationships

This has led to changes in the nature of both universities' relationships within states and between states. Within states, what is clear is that priorities are being set increasingly by governments through national strategies or performance agreements. Whereas historically the state provided for the needs of universities, today the university provides for the needs of the state. Rankings have played a significant role in reframing these relationships.

Globalisation of higher education has also changed the relationship between states. As nations compete based on their knowledge and innovation systems, higher education plays a key role as it is transformed from being a predominantly social institution with a local or sub-national remit to being the cornerstone of economic policy with geopolitical responsibilities.

These developments help explain the rise and fascination with global rankings – their success is tied to mapping patterns of investment and outcomes, especially across the bio-sciences and technology, thereby signalling disparities in capacity and capability. In fact, rankings are a lag-indicator – reflecting changes that have already occurred.

Because universities and the state both benefit from the competition for talent and knowledge production, higher education is integral to national and global power relations.

While competition has accelerated between nations and their universities for a greater share of the global marketplace, pursuance of 'world-class' status has become a shared strategy of trans-nationalising elites. Transnational networks form a necessary function in strengthening position within the global knowledge value chain.

Rankings are an important tool in this regard – which explains why nations and institutions both use them as a benchmark of success. While allegations of 'gaming' simply deflect attention away from the bigger problems associated with rankings, it is evident higher education institutions do use rankings in various ways and for various purposes to strengthen their value-proposition by restricting access to 'positional goods', such as credentials.

Thus, rather than seeing higher education as an innocent victim, universities and their faculty have become global actors constructing and extending their own sphere of influence in a competitive, hierarchically differentiated status system.

Rankings reflect and map these changing dynamics. Looking beyond their



technical/mechanical characteristics – which we have come to love and hate – they play a significant hegemonic role, framing/reframing the relationship of higher education to the state and society.

### **Rethinking how universities are organised**

While rankings have coincided with the necessity for closer scrutiny of quality, performance and productivity, it is clear that the accountability agenda is not simply a manifestation of neo-liberalism.

Yes, there are underpinning ideological drivers that have seeded deep questioning about the role and purpose of public-good facing organisations. But as global competition accelerates and the reputation arms-race heats up, it is evident that no government can or will be able to afford all the higher education its citizens demand or society requires.

It is also fair to say that too much is made of the tensions between state governance and institutional autonomy – and that higher education needs to (re)affirm its commitment to the public good in a way that goes beyond making a simple correlation between what it does (teach and research) and societal benefit.

The public voice has asserted itself in a demonstrable and vocal way – and not always to our liking. In ways that are becoming evident, these changes highlight also the extent to which the university has become isolated from its many publics.

Thus, as these new constituencies, such as students, business/enterprise and civic society – each of which are heterogeneous – operate alongside national and global determinants, there is an obligation to rethink the way that higher education is organised, as well as how it is steered, led and managed.

Policy, provision, funding and organisation are a very different proposition when participation is near-universal. These developments are changing the relationship between higher education and the state in very profound ways, and there is unlikely to be a return to the 'golden age'.

If I may be controversial, many of the reforms being pursued now are both necessary and inevitable – and arguably late in coming.

### **The demand for accountability**

Higher education is part of a wider geopolitical landscape. Higher education – and elite universities in particular – along with their students and staff have benefited despite all the controversies around education as an internationally-traded service. The demand for evidence of contribution and impact is arguably a response to its own claims that higher education is a driver of the economy – the government and public have simply called their bluff.

As people know, I am a strong critic of rankings; their methodology is unsuitable, the indicators are insufficiently meaningful and the data is unreliable. This has not stopped rankings from being used and adopted by governments and universities around the world, to maintain and boost their presence internationally.

One of the significant outcomes of the rankings discourse – whether we agree with them or not – is that they provide some form of accountability. In so doing, rankings have reframed the way in which higher education interacts with its state on the global stage.

### **World-classness and individualism**

A big lesson of rankings is the extent to which higher education policy has become vulnerable to an agenda set by others. Rankings promote the crypto-currency of 'world-classness'; their results and their advocates promulgate the view that they hold the secret recipe – if only governments and universities would align themselves more closely with the indicators.

Success in world-science is usually based upon concentration of talent and resources, but

critics argue that such strategies can undermine national economic capacity, amplifying the benefits of global cities whilst undermining regional towns and widening the privilege gap. Pursuit of excellence is measured in terms of achievements of individual universities rather than the system or society collectively; in other words, it promotes world-class universities rather than world-class systems.

For people in developed/OECD countries, the underlying belief was that each generation would be better off than the previous one; that progress was a birth-right. But, at a time when higher education is in growing demand, more people feel left behind – struggling to live up to societal and personal expectations.

Unequal distribution of societal goods has been accompanied by a perception others are doing better. We are competing with cities and countries which most of us never knew of or considered a few years previously, generating a deep sense of grievance.

Higher education has historically had a close relation with the city and country of its founding, but, today, its institutions are considered part of the elite, with campuses viewed as islands of affluence amid 'seas of squalor, violence and despair'.

Colleges that have prided themselves on working across borders of country and culture now find themselves in opposition with governments that want to keep out 'foreigners'. Education and mobility, even within the country, have appeared as fault lines in voting behaviour in the United Kingdom (2016), the United States (2016), France (2017) and elsewhere.

Many fundamental values of higher education – cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, international collaboration, the free flow of people and ideas, broadly liberal social values and the pursuit of truth – are perceived as threatening. These deepening social-cultural cleavages help explain the rise of populist social-political reaction – a likely ongoing feature of our societies over the coming decades.

### **Civic disengagement**

Societal problems are not the sole result nor responsibility of higher education, but higher education's hands are not clean.

Disturbingly, many universities have become civically disengaged. They have transformed themselves into self-serving private entities less engaged or committed to their nation/region as they eagerly pursue their world-class position and shout about the public good.

The public's interest is being confused with private self-interest. The 'implicit social contract' is in trouble. This is creating a vacuum, pushing the state, often controversially, to step back in, to (re)assume a strong(er) co-ordinating role to reaffirm 'the public good' by way of national strategies, frameworks and funding mechanisms.

We sit at a historic junction – one in which higher education has the opportunity and responsibility to play a critical role in (re)building a shared sense of societal purpose and identity. To be effective, it needs to move away from arguments of self-interest and victimhood.

It's not just about what happens on campus or grandstanding about what the university does for society. Rather, there is an onus on universities and colleges, of all missions, to rethink and reshape relations with their publics and the state, and to re-orient themselves, alongside their students, staff and graduates, and the wider community, to become an intellectual force to bridge the gap between local, national and global. There is no time for complacency.

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