

Bruegel Blueprint

'Higher aspirations: An agenda for reforming European universities'

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MEDIA MEMO

What is the background to this report?

Since the introduction of the Shanghai ranking of the world's universities it has been clear that European universities are underperforming. While comparative indicators are useful to start a discussion, they are not sufficient to conclude it. Why are Europe's higher education institutions performing so poorly in the ranking? Is it because their mission statements do not correspond to the Shanghai criteria? Because they lack resources? Because they are poorly governed? Because they do not select their students? Because they are too small? This report discusses the potential explanations and points at different reform priorities for higher education in Europe.

Country performance in the Shanghai ranking (measured as percentages of the US per capita performance)

Country	Population (millions)	Top 50	Top 100	Top 200	Top 500
Austria	8.2	0.0	0.0	0.4	52.6
Belgium	10.4	0.0	0.0	61.3	122.4
Czech Republic	10.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	13.1
Denmark	5.4	0.0	74.6	113.5	160.5
Finland	5.2	0.0	45.5	75.4	80.5
France	60.2	3.0	15.2	28.6	45.1
Germany	82.5	0.0	17.0	36.5	67.0
Greece	11.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	12.2
Hungary	10.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	13.3
Ireland	4.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	50.0
Italy	57.6	0.0	0.0	11.1	33.9
Netherlands	16.3	20.2	50.7	75.9	131.3
Poland	38.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.5
Spain	42.7	0.0	0.0	0.1	14.2
Sweden	9.0	6.7	116.5	178.8	216.9
UK	59.8	72.0	86.1	98.0	123.9
EU15	383.3	12.7	26.0	41.0	67.3
EU25	486.6	10.0	20.5	32.4	53.9
Norway	4.6	0.0	65.8	90.6	107.0
Switzerland	7.4	97.1	165.5	228.1	229.6
Australia	20.1	0.0	31.4	65.8	100.7
Canada	31.9	39.3	54.2	62.9	103.6
Japan	127.7	14.3	17.2	24.3	26.7
US	293.7	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
California	36.1	234.2	198.5	163.2	103.2
Massachusetts	6.4	448.7	307.8	301.7	263.0
New York	19.3	195.7	167.4	138.7	147.7
Pennsylvania	12.4	110.7	176.9	161.0	115.2
Texas	22.9	32.7	60.9	82.8	102.5

What are the main findings in the report?

1. The level of student mobility in Europe is low.
2. More generalist and flexible undergraduate curricula are better at 'matching' institutions with students and may thus contribute to reducing failure rates at undergraduate level.
3. The research performance of Europe's universities still lags far behind that of their US counterparts, particularly in the top 50 universities in the 'Shanghai ranking', thus selection at entry should become the norm, specialisation and mobility should be encouraged, and fees are easier to justify if supported by scholarships, income-contingent loans and teaching assistantships.

What policy recommendations are given in the report?

Increase the funding for universities: it would make sense to raise gradually annual expenditure on higher education by one percent of European Union GDP over the next ten years.

Increasing university autonomy: autonomy and funding are mutually reinforcing factors.

Increasing mobility and completion: the EU should foster mobility for students and faculty and promote the development of autonomous and competitive graduate schools.

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