

Our Universities Today

Andrew Oswald, Professor of Economics, University of Warwick

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Stick up for the truth even when inconvenient. Use evidence. Write short sentences. That is my generic advice to young economists. It would be nice to think that the UK's universities and academic-related organizations could also get something out of such principles. In higher education, the year had two notable features. One was the publication of a misleading global university league table. The other was the start of the fifth of the government's heavily bureaucratic Research Assessment Exercises.

First, 2007 saw the release, by a UK commercial organization, of an unpersuasive world university ranking. This put Oxford and Cambridge at equal second in the world. Lower down, at around the bottom of the world top-10, came University College London, above MIT. A university with the name of Stanford appeared at number 19 in the world. The University of California at Berkeley was equal to Edinburgh at 22 in the world.

Such claims do us a disservice. The organizations which promote such ideas should be unhappy themselves, and so should any supine UK universities who endorse results they view as untruthful. Using these league table results on your websites, universities, if in private you deride the quality of the findings, is unprincipled, and will ultimately be destructive of yourselves, because if you are not in the truth business what business are you in, exactly? Worse, this kind of material incorrectly reassures the UK government that our universities are international powerhouses.

Let us instead, a bit more coolly, do what people in universities are paid to do. Let us use reliable data to try to discern the truth.

In the last 20 years, Oxford has won no Nobel Prizes. (Nor has Warwick.) Cambridge has done only slightly better. Stanford University in the United States, purportedly number 19 in the world,

garnered three times as many Nobel Prizes over the past two decades as the universities of Oxford and Cambridge did combined. Worryingly, this period since the mid 1980s coincides precisely with the span over which UK universities have had to go through government Research Assessment Exercises (RAEs).

To hide away from such inconvenient data is not going to do our nation any good. If John Denham, the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, is reading this, perhaps, as well as doing his best to question the newspapers that print erroneous world league tables, he might want to cut out these last sentences, blow them up to 100 point font, and paste them horizontally in a red frame on his bedroom ceiling, so that he sees them every time he wakes up or gets distracted from other duties. In his shoes, or out of them, this decline would be my biggest concern.

Given below are the data for countries for three 20-year slices of time. It can be seen how since the 1980s the UK's Nobel-Prize performance has fallen off.

Second, knowing all this, what should we think of the current and the previous Research Assessment Exercises? These are meant to measure how good our universities are at producing brilliant ideas. As the first RAE ran in the mid-1980s, and our prize-winning science performance has been poor since then, the omens for RAE 2008 concern me.

My worry is grade inflation. It may be extreme. In the 1992 RAE, the 55 oldest universities in the UK submitted a total of 1799 departments to be assessed by many panels of expert readers. Of these university departments, 18% were given the top score of 'grade 5'. Yet in the 1996 RAE, the same group of universities submitted 1761 units, and 30% were graded 5. By the time of the 2001 RAE, 1676 units of assessment were submitted by these same universities, and 55% received a grade of 5.

Of course it could be that UK universities went up in quality over these twenty years. But if so, how come we had a striking decline in the United Kingdom's Nobel Prize performance, where the judges come from Stockholm and have no domestic axe to grind? Nobody

has offered an answer to this important question. It seems likely that, unfortunately, RAEs encourage people to do safely solid rather than riskily iconoclastic work. Judging from my conversations, many who work in higher education have this view. If correct, we need fundamentally to change the way the next RAE will be designed.

Christmas is coming. There is plenty to celebrate about the United Kingdom's universities. This country's contribution to humankind's thinking has been an extraordinarily fine one. I would like to see us now face and fix, rather than run away from, weaknesses. That would be in keeping with our nation's intellectual tradition.

Number of Nobel laureates by Nation – 20 year segments from 1947 to 2006

Nation 1947–66 1967–86 1987–2006

USA 50 88 126

UK 20 25 9

Germany 8 7 9

USSR/Russia 7 2 2

France 4 3 5

Switzerland 3 7 7

Sweden 3 7 1

Japan 2 1 3

A minimum of three prizes in one time segment is required for inclusion.

Source: Bruce Charlton, University of Newcastle UK