

MEASURING MORTARBOARDS

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A new sort of higher education guide for very discerning customers

WORKING out exactly what students and taxpayers get for the money they spend on universities is a tricky business. Now the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), a Paris-based think-tank for rich countries, is planning to make the task a bit easier, by producing the first international comparison of how successfully universities teach.

That marks a breakthrough. At the moment, just two institutions make annual attempts to compare universities round the world. Shanghai's Jiao Tong University has been doing it since 2003, and the TIMES HIGHER EDUCATION SUPPLEMENT, a British weekly, started a similar exercise in 2004. But both these indices, which are closely watched by participants in a fickle and fast-expanding global education market (see chart), reflect "inputs" such as the number and quality of staff, as well as how many prizes they win and how many articles they publish. The new idea is to look at the end result--how much knowledge is really being imparted.

"Rather than assuming that because a university spends more it must be better, or using other proxy measures for quality, we will look at learning outcomes," explains Andreas Schleicher, the OECD's head of education research. Just as the OECD assesses primary and secondary education by testing randomly chosen groups of youngsters from each country in reading and mathematics, it will sample university students to see what they have learned. Once enough universities are taking part, it may publish league tables showing where each country stands, just as it now does for compulsory education. That may produce a fairer assessment than the two established rankings, though the British one does try to broaden its inquiry by taking opinions from academics and employers.

There is much to be said for the OECD's approach. Of course a Nobel laureate's view on where to study may be worth hearing, but dons may be so busy writing and researching that they spend little or no time teaching--a big weakness at America's famous universities. And changes in methodology can bring startling shifts. The high-flying London School of Economics, for example, tumbled from 17th to 59th in the British rankings published last week, primarily because it got less credit than in previous years for the impressive number of foreign students it had managed to attract.

The OECD plan awaits approval from an education ministers' meeting in January. The first rankings are planned by 2010. They will be of interest not just as a guide for shoppers in the global market, but also as indicators of performance in domestic markets. They will help academics wondering whether to stay put or switch jobs, students choosing where to spend their time and money, and ambitious university bosses who want a sharper competitive edge for their institution.

The task the OECD has set itself is formidable. In many subjects, such

as literature and history, the syllabus varies hugely from one country, and even one campus, to another. But OECD researchers think that problem can be overcome by concentrating on the transferable skills that employers value, such as critical thinking and analysis, and testing subject knowledge only in fields like economics and engineering, with a big common core.

Moreover, says Mr Schleicher, it is a job worth doing. Today's rankings, he believes, do not help governments assess whether they get a return on the money they give universities to teach their undergraduates. Students overlook second-rank institutions in favour of big names, even though the less grand may be better at teaching. Worst of all, ranking by reputation allows famous places to coast along, while making life hard for feisty upstarts. "We will not be reflecting a university's history," says Mr Schleicher, "but asking: what is a global employer looking for?" A fair question, even if not every single student's destiny is to work for a multinational firm.