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World University Rankings: boosting both competition and collaboration

Scientific endeavour has for centuries been driven on by both competitive and collaborative spirit, and the rankings can boost both, says Phil Baty

November 13, 2017



By Phil Baty ([/content/phil-baty](http://content/phil-baty))

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Pulling in the same direction: rankings can drive collaboration

“When we look at *Times Higher Education's* World University Rankings (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2018/world-ranking>), we see collaborators not competitors.”

This comment, made by Imperial College London (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/imperial-college-london>)'s vice provost for research, Nick Jennings, when the 2018 global rankings were released in early September, came back to me last week during the International Conference on World Class Universities in Shanghai, the seventh such event organised by Shanghai Jiao Tong University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/shanghai-jiao-tong-university>)'s Centre for World Class Universities.



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Of course, the *THE* World University Rankings foster competition. Scientific endeavour has for centuries been driven on by competitive spirit – the thirst to be first to new knowledge. *THE's* global rankings (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings>) provide the transparency, the case studies of success, and the international performance benchmarks to inspire healthy competition that drives up quality and standards for all.

But as delegates from across the world reflected on the 14 years since Shanghai Jiao Tong University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/shanghai-jiao-tong-university>) became the first to produce a global university ranking (just months before *Times Higher Education* published its first tentative iteration of the World University Rankings in 2004), there was a strong sense that rankings, for all their limitations and, indeed, faults, had another important role to play – the fostering of global collaboration.

This is not a new idea. A US Institute for Higher Education Policy report in 2009, *Impact of College Rankings on Institutional Decision Making*, found that “rankings can be important starting points to identify institutions with which to collaborate and partner”. These findings were backed by research in 2014 from Ellen Hazelkorn (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings-2014-2015/an-assessment-tool-to-be-used-with-care>), director of the Higher Education Policy Research Unit at the Dublin Institute of Technology (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/dublin-institute-technology>), who found evidence that such ranking-inspired partnerships were increasing.

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But at the Shanghai conference, whose theme was “Towards a Common Global Good”, the idea seemed to have reached maturity.

In his keynote speech, Simon Marginson (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/author/simon-marginson>), director of the Centre for Global Higher Education at the UCL Institute of Education, noted: “Although national governments tend to see science and world class universities as weapons of national competition, and though most universities want to improve their prestige and their ranking, world-class universities are primarily cooperative and positive sum.

“Global common goods in universities and science also have a longer-term importance,” he said. “Collaboration between world-class universities feeds the slow historical process whereby different national societies, without ceasing to be diverse, are becoming part of a one-world society.” Powerful words, particularly in the week when US President Donald Trump was in China for meetings with Chinese Premier Xi Jinping, and where cooperation was characterised as “the only correct choice” between the two nations.

Global comparison and rankings, Marginson said, were contributing by helping to shape world-class universities’ “visioning and strategy making”.

“The potential for collaboration across national borders, in both research and education, is facilitated by the worldwide convergence between leading higher education institutions in terms of organisational forms. The world-class university movement is the main isomorphic driver, shaping the logic of universities in terms of the performance indicators in ranking templates...

“Standardised forms speed people mobility, underpin joint publication and ease the framing of academic programmes and negotiation of partnerships.”

While the rankings are always the most eye-catching of *THE's* activities, we are committed to fostering collaboration, partnerships and global networks in many other ways.

The data scientists behind our data and analytical products, for example, have identified, through complex cluster analysis, new global groupings of institutions with similar characteristics, such as the “technology challengers (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/tech-challenger-universities-lead-way-on-industry-links>)” and the “international powerhouses (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/which-universities-could-challenge-higher-education-elite>)”.

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Times Higher Education also brings senior university leaders together, to forge new relationships and lasting networks, through our World Summit Series (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/summits>).

Our most recent summit, in London (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/policy/world-academic-summit>), was the 22nd of *THE's* global summits and the fourth of our flagship World Academic Summits. The series has built a wonderful global network – engaging close to 2,000 university leaders across 72 countries since our first event in Singapore in 2013.

In February, we will be in Shenzhen (<http://www.theworldsummitseries.com/events/the-asia-universities-summit-2018/event-summary-5ae036685e484e43be71807f3d87c315.aspx>), which – driven by innovation in technology – has transformed from a rural village just a few decades ago into China's third major city, and part of the Silicon Delta of high-tech, booming cities. Shenzhen has two strongly emerging local universities – including our summit hosts Sustech – but its success would not have been possible without international collaboration in higher education and research.

I hope to see you in Shenzhen, where world-class universities can take forward their ideals of global collaboration for the global public good.

Phil Baty is editorial director, global rankings, at *Times Higher Education*.

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