

Challenging Science: The Geopolitics of Knowledge & the Accountability Agenda

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To move towards a mass knowledge society (where progress depends on the “wisdom of the many”) or towards an elite knowledge society (where progress depends on the cutting-edge knowledge of the chosen few)?



Factors Driving Change in Policy & Attitudes

Two broad dimensions/trends underpin the changing relationship between higher education/university-based research and the state/society:

1. Geopolitics of science: increasing reliance of society and the economy on knowledge-production, and need for instruments to measure and compare quality and performance beyond national boundaries.
2. Social contract: that knowledge can be “at once authoritative and democratic, and can simultaneously inform expert instrumental use and public debate” (Calhoun, 2006, 8)



Globalisation and Geo-politics of Knowledge

Globalisation and intensification of competition between nations has heightened significance of knowledge as foundation of sustainable social/economic growth;

- HERD systems are open systems, highly dependent on internationalised knowledge networks and collaborations

Global science has assumed great significance:

- Reflect realization that in global knowledge economy, national pre-eminence is no longer sufficient;
- Role of/investment in higher education and university-based research has become a national differentiator.

Developments informing/influencing policy-making, academic behaviour, stakeholder opinions – and understanding of science.



Social Contract & Public Goods

Evolution from universities for the elite to mass institutions has been transformative – for individuals and for society;

But as participation has expanded, higher education and research has become more un-equal;

- Stratification of access to public goods and and life chances;

Yet, university-based research is more dependent on public funding.

- As Trow argues, once more people get involved, they have different views about what's important and how money should be spent.

For those who argue that pursuit of excellence inevitably involves inequality – there is a growing tension at heart of HERD's claim to be a public good.



Public Attitudes, Trust & Interest

Three inter-dependent issues:

Public attitudes towards public services, vis-à-vis level/quality of service, taxation/public funding required, etc.

Degree of *public trust* between different sectors of society,

Public interest in effective and efficient use of public resources, and contribution and value to society.



Accountability Agenda 1

Intensifying spotlight on contribution, value, impact, benefit and relevance;

- *Science, The Endless Frontier (1945)* emphasised primacy of fundamental scientific research and application to practical purposes;
- *Mode 2 (1994)* recognised broad range of research actors across breadth of disciplines/fields of inquiry and beyond the academy;
- *Societal Challenges (Lund Declaration, 2009)* problems of economic and social importance which require collaborative solutions, transcending borders;
- Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) (2015) interconnected local/global goals set by the United Nations General Assembly.
- Plan S (EU/ScienceEurope, 2018) public access to publicly-funded research.



Accountability Agenda 2

Once research is seen to have value/impact beyond the academy, there are implications for organisation/management of research, what kind of research is funded, how it is measured and by whom.

- No longer *solely* pursuit of individual intellectual curiosity but balanced by social/national priorities.

At the same time, public scrutiny and transparency regularized, underpinned by questions around value, impact and benefit;

- How is knowledge used and circulated?
- Who benefits?



Challenging & Ranking Science

Science has always operated in competitive environment – but what recent developments have in common is the on-going search to measure and compare quality and performance across national boundaries.

Rankings are an inevitable part of this process – but they are also a perversion of accountability agenda – unsuited for high participation democratic societies.



Beware a Rankings-led Strategy 1

Overemphasis on performance of top/elite universities creates misconceptions about overall “system” performance;

- Assumes national performance = totality of individual universities;
- Inappropriate for a massified system with diverse students and providers.

Makes global prestige and reputation dominant drivers of policy/decision rather than quality, societal impact, greater equity or diversity, etc.

- Amplify benefits and prestige of elite universities and their graduates,
- Research excellence frameworks produce a hierarchy of institutions, which by and large go with the hierarchy of cities and regions
- Drives growing social and educational stratification, and regional disparity.



Beware a Rankings-led Strategy 2

Rankings affect/reorient research priorities and practices:

- Emphasis on global reputation undermining nationally/regionally relevant activity and outcomes;
- Frequency of rankings/assessments encourages short-termism and easily/quickly publishable work;
- Reinforces a simplistic science-push view of innovation;
- Achieves accountability within the “academy” rather than via social accountability;

Priorities set by commercial/other rankings undermines national sovereignty and institutional autonomy;



Renewing the Social Contract

Policy-makers, taxpayers, students, graduates and employers, and society overall, require confidence that HEIs are performing at the level required, and producing the necessary impact and benefit;

Time to renew the “social contract”:

- Knowledge gains legitimacy and value via social/public accountability;
- Moving from implicit to explicit social contract.

Requires an agreed vision and clarity around goals, and the most appropriate and meaningful indicators, which can capture the contribution of universities in the public interest.



The Way Forward

Rankings are only one kind of comparison tool. While simple to understand, their indicators of success undermine and thwart the public good.

As Calhoun argues, public support for universities is only given and maintained according to their capacity, capability and willingness to “educate citizens in general, to share knowledge, to distribute it as widely as possible in accord with publicly articulated purposes” (Calhoun, 2006, p. 19).

Today’s complex problems require holistic engagement between universities and society, putting knowledge in service to society through teaching and learning, scholarship and research, collaboration, outreach and communication.



**Research Handbook on
University Rankings: History,
Methodology, Influence and
Impact**

**Ed. Ellen Hazelkorn
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Are We Measuring What's Meaningful?

Indicator	Metric	Pro	Con
Research Publications and Outputs	e.g. Total number of peer publications	Measures & Improves Activity	Basis not always clear
Quality and Scholarly Impact	e.g. Citations; High Impact Publications	Measures & Improves Quality	Which journals? Most effective in English-language
Human Capital	e.g. PhD completions; output/FTE or active researcher	Measures Timeliness of completion & productivity	Differences between disciplines; can manipulate "faculty" denominator
Investment	e.g. Income & donations; competitive funding	Predictor of performance	Difficult to get valid comparable data; favours capital-intensive sciences disciplines
Economic and Social Benefit	e.g. Commercialised IP & employability	Link between RDI	Time-lag and context: different disciplines/HEIs have different impacts and timelines
End-User Esteem	e.g. Appointments to high level organisations	Measures reputation	Time-lag and difficult to verify
Research Infrastructure	e.g. Library & research space	Measures capability	Difficult to get valid comparators