US and UK universities slip in new QS world rankings

Brendan O'Malley 08 June 2017 Issue No:463

Massachusetts Institute of Technology or MIT has been named the world's top university for the sixth year running in the latest QS World Rankings, released today.

This year's ranking includes 935 universities and US universities take all top four positions, and five of the top ten, with UK taking also taking four top ten spots and Switzerland taking 10th spot.

However, both the US and UK are losing ground lower down the rankings, which QS says, provides evidence that "both nations are at risk of becoming less international".

The top ten were the same institutions as last year, with no change in the top three (MIT, Stanford, Harvard), and most of the rest only moving up or down one place (California Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Oxford, University College London, Imperial College London, Chicago) and ETH Zurich dropping two places.

The noticeable trend is the increasing international competition chipping away at the dominance of US and UK universities.

Seventy-one of the US's 158 ranked institutions have dropped places, while 41 have risen, and the US share of both the top 100 and top 400 has fallen.

Of the seventy-six ranked UK institutions, 51 have moved down the rankings his year. This included 16 of the 24 ranked Russell Group institutions.

Of the 157 US universities ranked this year, 107 have seen a drop in their International Student Ratio scores, while the UK has seen the proportion of international students at its universities drop.

Ben Sowter, Research Director, QS, attributed MIT's success to it being a "nucleus of an unrivalled innovation ecosystem".

He said companies created by its alumni enjoyed combined revenues of $2 trillion, making them the equivalent of the world's 11th largest economy.

"Many still work closely with MIT researchers, make substantial donations to their alma mater or just furnish the MIT brand with a bit of aspirational gleam.

"The power of this visionary position cannot be overestimated and other institutions are now scrambling to catch up. However, their continued dominance at the top should not obscure a changing landscape elsewhere, with other US and UK institutions making way for the best of Russia, China and India – among others."

Nick Hillman, Director of the Higher Education Policy Institute, said the competitiveness of UK universities has been affected by austerity.

"In particular, tuition fees have been frozen for five years and research funding has not grown as fast as in some other countries. So the latest QS rankings should give policymakers pause for thought," he said.

The new government – today is a general election – would have to work hard if UK universities were to regain their previous position, he said.

QS suggested that the rapid expansion at many UK universities since Government restrictions on recruitment were lifted is partly responsible for this year's decline. Staffing levels have not kept pace and the numbers of citations per faculty members have suffered.

Rise of technological universities

Other key trends include good performances from universities with a strong technological focus, with Singapore's Nanyang Technological University or NTU rising to 11th, the highest position ever achieved by an Asian university; Korea's KAIST reaching a record high at 41st; and Delft University of Technology becoming the Netherland's leading university for the first time since 2005.

Western universities in general continue to find progress more difficult to achieve than at any point since the ranking began, with 140 of the region's 236 ranked university dropping down places.

China has seen gains with six universities in the Top 100, two more than last year.

India now boasts three universities among the top 200, two more than last year.

Among the most successful nations this year are Australia, whose Australian National University returns to the top 20; Russia; and Malaysia, according to QS.

Both Singapore's NTU and Switzerland's EPFL are knocking at the door of the top ten, both having risen two places since last year.

NTU's achievement has added significance because of its young age – it is 26 years old and has held the top spot in the QS Top 50 Universities Under 50 rankings for the past three years.

NTU President, Professor Bertil Andersson, said: "This No. 11 spot is the highest position a young university has attained in the QS world university rankings. I hope NTU's success, which is built on hard work, determination and a mindset of change, will be an inspiration to other young universities in the world."

He said as a young university, NTU has been "in hyper drive – ramping up research, [and] designing innovative academic and research programmes, building new facilities".

QS's Ben Sowter said: "The fact that an institution of NTU's youth and profile finds itself on the brink of the world's top 10 is a remarkable achievement and a testament to a concentrated, selective funding model, strong and consistent leadership, sticking with an ambitious tactical plan and a radical approach to international partnerships and collaboration."

In the past month alone, NTU Singapore has announced tie-ups with heavyweights such as the Smart City World Labs, a Danish consortium, Australia's Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) and Canada's University of British Columbia.

"This builds on its already impressive list of 400 academic and research partnerships with institutions across the world," Sowter said.

NTU has risen 63 places in the rankings since 2010.

According to analysis provided by QS, this year's ranking shows no trend towards people travelling smaller distances to study or leaving their homeland less, which might have been expected in the wake of the rise of anti-immigrant feeling and rising political pressure to control immigration in some countries.

The analysis suggests that if the US and UK become less attractive to mobile students, continental European universities could be among the beneficiaries.

However, the performance of European countries in the rankings is mixed. Germany has the third-highest number of ranked institutions, after the US and UK, with 45, but none in the top 50 and only three in the top 100. France has 39 ranked universities but only two in the top 100. Italy and Spain have none in the top 150. By contrast Switzerland has six in the top 150, including two at 10th and 12th and two others in the top 100; and the Netherlands has eight in the top 150, including two in the top 100.

Opposition to immigration

Elsewhere, QS suggests, if increasing hostility to immigrants does in future lead to more short-distance international study, there are countries already well placed to respond. Most of the foreign students in China, for example, are from nearby counties such as Vietnam. The same goes for Russia, which draws students from the former Soviet nations of central Asia.

Currently China's highest ranked university for international students is Peking University at 298 in the world, and Russia's highest is Lomonosov, at 297, showing both nations have great scope to increase international student recruitment.

If Asian immigration becomes less acceptable to the world, QS says, universities in the Anglo-Saxon countries could lose out. But Taiwan, Japan and Korea, all below 500th place for international students, could fare better if students from the region start to want a world-class education, without the cost and trouble of going to

Australia, Europe or North America.

QS notes that Russian universities have maintained the progress they recorded last year with Lomonosov Moscow State University re-entering the top 100 after an absence of several years. Russia's top five universities (one in the top 100, two in the top 300 and two in the top 400) have all risen more than 10 places in the latest ranking, and 14 of the 24 ranked institutions are up on last year.

China now has six universities in the top 100 – up from four last year. Hong Kong has four in the top 50, and Singapore has two in the top 20. Japan still has four in the top 100.

The QS rankings, released three months earlier than in previous years, ranks 43 more institutions than last year, with 959 universities ranked from 84 countries, collectively boasting 23.6 million full time equivalent (FTE) students, including 2.7million FTE international students.

Africa's best performer is South Africa with nine ranked universities, the highest, Cape Town, holding its position at 191, but only three in the top 500. Egypt has one in the top 500, the American University in Cairo (395=) and five ranked. Kenya and Uganda have one each ranked.

The expert opinion of 75,015 academics and 40,455 employers contributed to the 2018 edition of the rankings. 12.3m papers and 75.1m citations were analysed from the bibliometric database Scopus/Elsevier, to measure institutional research impact.

The methodology involves evaluation according to six weighted metrics: academic reputation (40%), employer reputation (10%), faculty members:student ratio (20%), citations per faculty member (20%), international faculty ratio (5%), and international student ratio (5%).