QS crowns ‘big 4’ again as Europe and Asia bite at their heels

The QS World University Rankings 2019 has crowned a familiar winner, with MIT topping the charts for a record-breaking seventh year consecutively. In fact, the top four places have not changed over the past year, with Stanford, Harvard and Cal Tech protecting their lofty places at the top of the table, in that order.

The international university sector may not have changed hugely in 2018, but QS say it could be the start of change. Photo: The PIE News

After slight drops in recent years, QS sees the US and UK markets as stabilising, with more recorded improvements than drops in this tally for 2019. The first change at the top of the table reflects this situation, with Oxford leapfrogging long-time rival Cambridge, but despite the switch both institutions remain safe in fifth and sixth respectively. This is the first change in the UK’s top institution since QS began compiling its rankings in this format, in 2011.

In mainland Europe there is reason for cheer, as the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, in Zurich, jumps from 10th place to seventh, and swapping places directly with UCL. Imperial College London and the University of Chicago retain eighth and ninth places. Outside of the western hemisphere, but only narrowly outside the top 10, is National University of Singapore – gaining four places to rise to 11th from 15th just a year previous. Singapore is again home to the cream of Asian tertiary education, with Nanyang Technological University ranking in 12th spot.
Elsewhere in Asia Chinese HEIs continue to improve, and within a year of Beijing’s Ministry of Education announcing plans for 50 institutions to be ‘world class’ by 2050, several are making strides.

In the capital, Tsinghua improved from 25th to 17th place in just one year, and Peking University also maintained its position as second-best Chinese HEI, jumping eight places to 30th. Japan is also knocking on the door of the top 20, with the University of Tokyo rising from 28th to 23rd – proving that Japanese HEIs are among the best in Asia.

On the African continent, South African institutions continue to dominate the QS World rankings, though six Egyptian institutions are ranked, with two HEIs in the capital city Cairo being placed – albeit outside of the top 200.

In fact, with the University of Cape Town in 200th spot, Africa is on the precipice of not having any HEI represented in the top tier. It dropped nine places in just one year to its current position, the third such fall in only four years.

Australia remains in third position on the global scale, with five institutions in the top 50 globally. Only the US and UK outstrip the land ‘down under’. The Australian National University in Canberra remains the Antipodean number one, despite slipping four places to rank 24th in 2019. Although some parts of the Australian sector may be nervous, with Canada threatening to take its crown as the leader in international recruitment, the Australian HE sector is remarkably stable. A solid 15 institutions have improved their positions, while 12 have fallen and 10 remain in the same position as 12 months prior.

Research director at QS, Ben Sowter, said in a statement that these latest results show an increase in international competitiveness, which could threaten the US’s preeminence in years to come. He is clear, however, that this picture cannot be seen from one year’s survey, and it could yet be “an anomaly”.

“However, it remains to be seen whether this year is the beginning of a prolonged period of US consolidation, or an anomaly. Certainly the signs of increasing international competitiveness still remain,” he said.

“China has devoted considerable effort into improving research output, with three of the 11 most prolific paper-producing universities situated there. In addition, there is no evidence that the relentless erosion of the US’s international education ascendancy is abating.”