

Initiative has had on German Universities. After presenting the traditional views on higher education in Germany, this paper describes the budget distribution of the Initiative as well as its effects.

Results

In response to the lackluster position of German universities in international rankings, in 2006 the German government initiated its Excellence Initiative and began to invest large sums in a few select universities. The results have been alternatively described by using the metaphors of a lighthouse and a windmill.

Universities in modern Germany mainly subscribe to the ideal of Humboltian homogenization; by contrast, the Initiative is based on promoting academic excellence through competition. Moreover, the budget distribution of the Initiative is quite centralized, and the federal government is making rapid progress in its efforts to rank German universities. The focus of the Initiative is on cutting-edge research rather than academics, with additional funding being made available based on the results of such research. As a result, teaching quality has been neglected, as evidenced by the decreasing importance given to teaching prizes, teaching assistantships, and academic professorsips. Another result of the Initiative is that it encourages intense competition to recruit top-notch scholars, who are likely to end up concentrated in a small number of elite research institutions. Even so, creating a world-class research university is not merely a matter of investing vast sums of money in a small number of schools. This is made clear from the case of Munich University, which has actually dropped in the international rankings and would be better described as a “windmill” rather than a “lighthouse.”

Conclusion and Suggestion

The Excellence Initiative uses research quality as the sole criterion for determining which institutions should be categorized as elite universities.

Yet, such an approach fails to meet the needs of an increasingly complex and diverse society. It would be better to take into account a diversity of criteria, and base categorization on each school's particular strength, so as to determine in which fields emphasis should be placed on advanced research, and in which fields emphasis should be placed on education and providing students with the skills they require to be competitive in the job market. Such an approach would make the most of the different strengths of different universities in accordance with the diverse needs of contemporary society.

Although the Excellence Initiative concentrates on cutting-edge research rather than teaching and ordinary academic research, it has also had a major impact on teaching. For the Initiative concentrates budget allocations on research and takes research results as the primary criteria for renewed funding, while giving secondary importance to teaching quality. As for academic research, another result of the Initiative is that it encourages intense competition to recruit top-notch scholars, who are likely to end up concentrated in a small number of elite research institutions. In its efforts to compete with American ivy league schools, Germany has recently invested many millions of euros in a small number of universities, but its universities have yet to show much improvement in the international rankings.

The Initiative's emphasis on classifying schools into different types is not necessarily an improvement over the traditional emphasis on homogeneity, but it does indicate some new possibilities. In different countries higher education has developed in different ways. The Excellence Initiative takes American academia as its yardstick, but the American model is not very suitable to Germany, largely due to the latter's greater emphasis on academic rigor. Moreover, in the market place of higher education it's difficult for German universities to offer the same selling points as top-notch American universities. For learning the German language remains a considerable barrier, and the effects of the substantial government funding for higher education are rather limited. Actually, high-quality universities are now springing up all over the world, not so much out of a commitment to academic excellence, but rather as a way of enhancing the nation's international competitiveness in the higher education market place. In the course of implementing reforms to an educational system, it is essential to carefully evaluate the results; this is something Taiwan needs to keep in mind while endeavoring to create world-class universities.

Getting a number of Taiwan's universities ranked in the top one hundred schools worldwide largely depends on the ability of its professors to get a larger number of research papers published in international journals, a task easier said than done. One effect of the Excellence Initiative in Germany has been to bifurcate the nation's universities into "excellent universities" and "non-excellent universities." The lesson for Taiwan in all this is the need for diversity in the development of higher education. Instead of giving exclusive emphasis to getting papers published in overseas journals, it would be better to give more importance to developing the different strengths of different fields, so as to better meet the diverse needs of modern society.

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