

University Systems: Beyond League Tables Engines of Growth or Ivory Towers?

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Abstract

Literature on higher education presents a gap between the ubiquitously used rankings of universities and a more comprehensive and qualitative measurement of national higher education systems. A glance at the university system performance at the regional scale may help to bridge this gap. In the present paper the quality of the university system at the regional level is analyzed in relation to a spectrum of functions: providing the appropriate human capital, promoting social mobility and cohesion, fostering research and innovation, and cooperating with industry and enterprises. A comparative study on regional university systems in Europe is carried out using the university-level dataset resulting from the Feasibility Study for Creating a European University Data Collection (EUMIDA). The dataset, which represents a crucial step towards a regular data collection on Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Europe, enabled us to measure the research-related aspects. This measure is then contrasted with indicators on regional competitiveness and labour market efficiency in order to explore the (mis)match between regional university systems and territorial needs. We find high and significant correlation between university research performance and variables such as the territorial competitiveness, the labour market efficiency, and the innovation capability of European regions. The analysis shows the presence of peculiar regions, in which the university system performance seems to be disproportionately greater

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than regional labour market efficiency and the level of innovation. This can be due to universities not conducting “the right kind of research,” or the labour market lacking the capacity to absorb knowledge produced by universities. The analysis suggests that insufficient interaction with the labour market could be the underlying issue.

Keyword: Composite Indicators; Regional University Systems; Research Performance; Regional Competitiveness