

Best universities in Europe 2016: secrets of Germany's success

Uwe Brandenburg explores the role that the Berlin government's Excellence Initiative has played in the latest *THE* ranking

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By [Uwe Brandenburg](#)



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If we are looking for reasons for Germany's success in [Times Higher Education's European ranking](#), we must begin with the Excellence Initiative.

This [was established](#) with the explicit aim of furthering the global role of German higher education institutions and to strengthen their international profiles and improve their research. It has poured €1.9 billion (£1.5 billion) in the first round and another €2.7 billion in the second into a select group of graduate schools, departments ("excellence clusters") and institutions since it was launched in 2005-06.



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According to a recent expert report examining its effectiveness, known as the [Imboden Report](#), there were two key goals: to increase the horizontal differentiation between higher education institutions by having each focus on specific research topics, and an improvement in governance. The first, the report says, was partially achieved; while the latter produced rather unintended side-effects, such as excellence clusters mutating into independent entities within the higher education institutions.

More important to rankings, the report notes that the Excellence Initiative has made German research more internationally collaborative. However, even this does not help much in assessing whether finding [36 German higher education institutions among the top 200](#) is good, bad or middling, and whether the Excellence Initiative has anything to do with it.

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In my view, the Excellence Initiative has had a strong influence by way of its most criticised aspect, the so-called “future concept” or “third-line” funding focusing on the project-based extension of top-notch research, often with a strong internationalisation component. Every university to have been given excellence status in this line figures among the 36 in *THE*'s top 200. Yet, as Imboden states, this funding line was distributed on the basis of pure assumptions, promises and wishes, some of which came true and some of which didn't. However, as a high-level representative of the Chinese Scholarship Council in Germany told me in 2006, “all Chinese universities only want to work with the excellent German HEIs now”, by which they meant the third-line institutions. “We try to tell them that research excellence is especially [found] among the excellence clusters and graduate schools, but to little avail.”

So, in the end, if it is focused on reputation, any ranking replicates this perspective. Still, there are nearly 400 other German higher education institutions (more than 200 of them are state institutions, although there are only roughly 50 more universities), so what does such a ranking mean? Frankly, I think the success of certain institutions in rankings is more to do with the rankings' methodology than anything else. They inevitably favour factors that are statistically more likely to be found among certain universities than others.

You need to look very closely to find a small university in the rankings, for instance. I wonder why. Is global excellence only about size? Surely not. Of course size matters, as it offers more diversity, attracts different people and accumulates funding. Still, excellence can also be found in relatively small places. So, to me, it is not about [funding or tuition fees](#) (that could at best explain why some countries do better than others, but not why certain institutions within a country do better than others), but rather the criteria by which we define “global players”.

In my experience, German higher education institutions are as strong as others in countries with comparable conditions. We certainly have a strong economy and we see serious funding going into higher education. So yes, it is no wonder that German HEIs are quite strong in research.

I just tend to doubt that this is why they feature in the ranking as they do. As we know, the debate on what should be looked at by rankings, and how – perhaps the key word here is differentiation – is open right now, with several players such as *THE*, Shanghai, U-Multirank and *US News & World Report* arguing about the right answers.

Maybe the answer is that there is no one right answer but that each approach may serve a different need – and that

the debate about which is better is an academic one.

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