

From the Editor

In present-day terms, higher education is far different than in its past. Broadly speaking, universities in the 21st Century are under increasing pressure to meet certain protocols, most of which are financial, and to recast their respective degrees and research to be more in keeping with industry standards. Other institutions of higher education are also under such pressure, but with the added challenge of differentiating themselves from their university counterparts and meeting specific needs. Both types help improve the economic well-being of the nation-state through the formal education and training of skilled workers but, because of generous donations from the 'public purse', they are often held up to scrutiny with regard to quality issues in teaching and research. In general, all are differentiated from their past to the degree that educational goals, loyalties, and degree attainment have changed over time. The pace of change at all levels of higher education from around the world is extraordinary, but caution must be considered if national assessment practices are to have a certain validity.

The challenge in raising the bar for improved and standardised national performances in academic teaching and research is to develop a process in which talent and achievement are not compromised. Individual institutional reputations that are based on merit may attract talent, but evidence seems to suggest that prospective students are more likely to matriculate in such institutions because of their expanded network of academic staff, students, and patrons than because of the consideration of institutional merit alone. There is additional evidence that identifies increasing levels of elitism and meritocracy in educational systems apparently obsessed more with league tables than imparting knowledge. Finally, those institutions that are less financially sound suffer additional consequences in the sense that the costs associated with national assessment reviews are often cost-prohibitive and offer little return-on-investment.

This special issue of the *IEJ: Comparative Perspectives* asks a series of questions concerning national assessment exercises. Do national assessment exercises encourage merit, talent, or achievement? Can such exercises be measured, comparatively-speaking, even if educational systems differ? Can merit, talent, and achievement equate to existing job opportunities or prospects for students who graduate from such institutions? The articles in this special edition help shed light on the specifics of a select number of national assessment exercises, the circumstances surrounding their respective implementation processes, and the subsequent outcomes.

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