**Does a world-class university strategy lift all boats?**

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Despite being around for over a decade, global rankings continue to exercise in incredible influence over higher education policy, institutional strategy, and student and academic prestige. Even when they are not explicit, there is often an implicit pursuit of world-class status – because of the correlation between rankings and the geopolitical political positioning of nations and institutions. This has led many governments to target, directly and indirectly, policies and funding to support and strengthen universities capable of competing at the highest international level, according to the rankings. Recent studies in the UK point to continued socio-economic tracking of higher education and career opportunities (Britton, Dearden, Shephard, & Vignoles, 2016; Britton, Shephard, Vignoles, & Dearden, 2016), and vulnerability of some of the most vulnerable institutions in the most vulnerable places (Goddard, Coombes, Kempton, & Vallance, 2014). This talk discusses the implications of such strategies and policies on the higher education system as a whole, and asks if a world-class strategy can lift all boats.

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