

## Figures reveal deep inequalities between rich and poor universities

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*The gap in income and resources between universities is even greater than that between public and state schools.*



Imperial College business school. Students are inevitably impressed by state-of-the-art buildings and facilities.  
Photograph: Ben Luxmoore/Alamy

In 1999, David Watson and Rachel Bowden published here in Education Guardian their Prosperity Index. They ranked universities by income from all sources per full-time equivalent student, this being a quantitative measure of the institutional resources a student would experience. Watson and Bowden found not only that there were already substantial differences between universities but also that institutions' positions correlated very well with their rank in the national league tables.

These differences persist and have grown. I recently updated the figures, though without allowing for subject mix or London weighting, for the institutions covered in the Guardian University Guide 2013 league tables. In 2010-11, gross income per full-time equivalent student ranged from £65,840 (Cambridge) to £7,050 (Edge Hill); the sector mean was £14,710.

These resourcing differentials are even clearer when one looks at institutional wealth. Leaving aside specialist colleges, net assets, excluding pension liabilities, per full-time student ranged from £152.46 (Cambridge) to £4.27 (Roehampton). Moreover, this wealth is highly concentrated: the 24 members of the Russell Group together own 52% of the sector's total net assets.

These differences will soon become even greater. The government has reinforced the policy of research concentration through its decision in 2011 that there should be no funding for research that was not judged to be "world-leading" or "internationally excellent" in the 2008 research assessment exercise. Those institutions that get the lion's share of the available research funding will also be most of those that are able to charge the full £9,000 fee and thus put even greater economic and reputational distance between themselves and their competitors. They are also the institutions that charge the highest fees to overseas and postgraduate students.

The new AAB+ threshold policy, in which universities may recruit as many AAB+ A-level students as they wish, will do for teaching what research selectivity has done for research, creating an elite group of institutions comfortably distanced from their domestic rivals and increasingly referred to, even by people who should know better, as "top" universities.

Do these resourcing differences – greater even than those between private and state schools – matter?

There is certainly a view that it is not absolute levels of resourcing that matter but how those resources are used. There is a substantial literature – mostly, but not exclusively, American – which finds that students gain little or no educational advantage from studying at a wealthier and more selective institution. The key to high educational quality is the extent of good educational practices, which are found in all kinds of institution. Against this, there is the role resources and other input factors play in the commercial league tables that are increasingly influencing student and employer choices. Good educational practices are hard to observe, and students are inevitably impressed with state-of-the-art lecture theatres, libraries or halls of residence. And who could blame universities for making the most of their funding advantages as they compete for students and revenue?

But there is a basic question of fairness. The better-resourced universities generally recruit students from better-off backgrounds, including many educated at private, taxpayer-subsidised, fee-charging schools. So students who have already had the most spent on them up to the age of 18 continue to have the most spent on them, reinforcing their social and educational capital. By the same token, many of their less favoured state school-educated brethren will continue to have less available to them. But there are wider issues too.

Watson once coined the term "a controlled reputational range" to describe the quality assurance processes that kept quality in UK higher education within broadly accepted limits. These resourcing differentials pose a direct challenge to this quality assurance, which underpins our still high international reputation for quality.

Finally, there is value for money. With the increase in the fee cap, the most selective universities will be charging undergraduates more than in any other comparable public system. Will these revenues be used to provide a genuinely excellent education, or will they be used, as the chair of University College London council admitted a couple of years ago, to cross-subsidise research? The government's response would no doubt be that competition and student pressures will bring them into line. Yet these institutions are impervious to market competition, selling themselves on status rather than educational effectiveness. Market competition is not the answer if we want a fair and efficient system.

So what should be done about these disparities? An immediate step would be to use the existing quality assurance apparatus to ask all institutions charging more than £6,000 to show how the additional revenues are used to improve student education. Those institutions receiving significant amounts of research money should also be required to provide evidence of how staff research benefits student learning (and vice versa). In the longer term, the fee level should be reduced and Higher Education Funding Council grants restored with a much stronger built-in equalising device so there are agreed limits to variations in levels of state support for teaching.

Do we want a fairer university system or don't we?

### **Richer and poorer**

Top 10 universities by income per full-time equivalent student 2010-11 (£k)

Cambridge 65.84  
Imperial College 48.82  
Oxford 46.82  
UCL 37.61  
Edinburgh 27.77  
LSE 26.24  
KCL 25.87  
Bristol 23.74  
Liverpool 23.47

Warwick 22.17

Bottom 10 universities by income per full-time equivalent student 2010-11

Chester 8.04

Bath Spa 7.97

Leeds Metropolitan 7.93

West of Scotland 7.91

Abertay Dundee 7.80

Swansea Met 7.57

Wales Newport 7.57

Wales Trinity St David 7.20

Glamorgan 7.08

Edge Hill 7.05

**Fonte: The Guardian [Portal]. Disponível em:**

**<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/sep/24/university-inequality-income-resources-unfair>>. Acesso em: 24 Sept. 2012.**

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