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## Technological Forecasting &amp; Social Change



# University excellence initiatives in Spain, a possible strategy for optimising resources and improving local performance

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 30 May 2014

Received in revised form 17 April 2015

Accepted 11 May 2015

Available online 28 May 2015

## Keywords:

Campus of International Excellence

Spain

Inter-institutional alliances

University performance

## ABSTRACT

This article analyses Spain's Campus of International Excellence (CEI) Programme and its potential for raising the visibility of the country's universities, optimising resources and intensifying interaction with the local surrounds. The examples studied are the UAM-CSIC (Autonomous University of Madrid + National Research Council) and EUSKAMPUS (University of the Basque Country + Donostia International Physics Center) CEIs. The main characteristics, mission and aims of these initiatives are discussed. The results are analysed in terms of the papers published in journals listed in international databases (Web of Science). The analysis compares each university's individual output to the results obtained by these inter-institutional alliances. The improvement observed in all the indicators studied highlights the importance of joining forces to attain higher visibility.

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## 1. Introduction

Education in general is presently undergoing considerable change worldwide. Higher education in particular is increasingly subject to the influence of market forces (Teixeira and Dill, 2011). Hazelkorn (2013) noted that the competition attendant upon globalisation is inducing a historic transformation in higher education the world over. With intensified national and international competitions among universities, international rankings have acquired a key role for policy makers and the public at large. The popularity of such tools has sparked an ongoing debate in most countries about the quality and performance of national higher education systems. World-class universities (a term coined by Altbach's (2004) paper),

i.e., the ones at the top of the list, are becoming the model for institutions of higher education (HEIs) around the world.

Governments are consequently pursuing the attainment of world-class status for their national universities, primarily by funnelling resources to a few HEIs or by encouraging partnering among universities and other research institutions (Hinfelaar and O'Connell, 2013). Altbach and Salmi (2011a,b) described nine case studies set in different contexts to illustrate the difficulty involved in building a world-class research university.

In some European countries, such as France, Germany and Spain, whose universities are not in prominent positions, programmes have been implemented to further academic excellence. The aim of such initiatives is to strengthen the position of the better placed institutions by increasing their funding and fostering the acquisition of greater critical mass. Some universities in these countries have reacted to such policies with partnering strategies that are prompting substantial change in their institutional structures and governance and the higher education system as a whole (de la Torre García et al., 2014).

In light of the importance of these institutional alliance policies, the present paper reviews the situation in Spain with

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an analysis of a specific initiative: the Campus of International Excellence Programme (Spanish initials, CEI).

The premise that guided this study was that inter-institutional alliances can be instrumental when responding to needs (cooperation to optimise resources and attain higher international visibility), for they would improve local performance and generate the critical mass required to attain higher ranks in international listings.

To verify that premise, the following objectives were pursued:

- to analyse the potential in collaboration among institutions with a common geography and able to generate synergies
- to study the impact of the joint activities of two initiatives: the Autonomous University of Madrid and National Research Council (UAM-CSIC) CEI and EUSKAMPUS, a CEI headed by the University of the Basque Country in conjunction with the Donostia International Physics Center
- to focus on the visibility of the scientific papers signed by the institutions participating in the Campus of Excellence Programme
- to determine whether these institutions' initiatives constitute a trend to be followed by others with a view to driving the Spanish university system forward through alliances with research institutes and bodies located in their spheres of influence.

To that end, the case study is set into context with a brief description, in [Section 2](#), of similar initiatives in other European countries. The sources and methodology used as well as the features of the Campus of International Excellence Programme are discussed below. Two specific CEIs were studied: UAM-CSIC (Autonomous University of Madrid + National Research Council) and EUSKAMPUS (University of the Basque Country + Donostia International Physics Center) ([Section 3](#)). The findings are set out in [Section 4](#), highlighting the beneficial effect of the two universities' inter-institutional alliances on their visibility. Lastly, the scope and limitations of the CEI Programme are addressed ([Section 5](#)).

## 2. University strategies to improve quality

In the wake of globalisation, today's higher education landscape is characterised by growing internationalisation and competitive pressure. [Huisman and Van der Wende \(2004\)](#) noted that many higher education institutions around the world are implementing internationalisation strategies, as opposed to their former nationally-oriented focus.

Since the creation of the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) in 2003, university listings have come into widespread use by scientific policy managers as well as by students, professors and researchers seeking the institutions of greatest prestige in which to pursue their careers. The appearance of such rankings has favoured the development of a global market for higher education in which all countries' major research universities participate. According to a European University Association report published in 2011, international rankings are biased toward research universities, inasmuch as the indicators focus primarily on research. Research-heavy universities are therefore seen to stand "at the pinnacle of the world's academic systems" ([Kearney and](#)

[Lincoln, 2013](#)). These institutions compete worldwide and are characterised by a high concentration of talent as well as a wealth of resources to provide a favourable environment for advanced research ([Altbach and Balan, 2007](#); [Salmi, 2009](#); [Liu et al., 2011](#)). The main implication of these developments, theoretically speaking, is a change in the model. Universities have moved from country-specific institutions to organisational actors expected to have goals and strategic plans for their implementation ([Ramirez, 2010](#)).

Visibility in the international listings of highest prestige has therefore become a matter of major consequence for educational institutions, for it enables them to attract resources more effectively. According to the [European University Association \(2011\)](#), however, one of the main objections to rankings is that they apply the same parameters to measure the activity of very diverse institutions (most such listings attach greater importance to research than to education), rendering many universities invisible. In light of such considerations, [Jamil Salmi \(2010\)](#) asks: "How many universities (in a country) can be in the top 500?". The answer, obviously, is that only the ones with a fully consolidated international and research profile, such as the major American and European institutions that head the list, are in a position to access the top spots ([Altbach and Salmi, 2011a,b](#)). For most universities in non-core countries, however, ranking among the world's top 100 is a tall order.

As prior studies showed, although the size of an institution is important, it is not sufficient to achieve a qualitative leap ([De Filippo et al., 2012](#)).

Further to the authors, small improvements in productivity and visibility do not suffice. The introduction of significant change would call for implementing a clear strategy to launch a group of the highest performing institutions on an international scale. Combining institutional strengths might be a promising option, encouraging cooperation between high quality universities ([Deiaco et al., 2009](#)). Not just any network, alliance or partnership is valid, however: relationships must be furthered between research-oriented institutions characterised by scientific excellence and dynamic and entrepreneurial managements.

In recent years, a number of excellence programmes have been implemented in European countries whose universities are not listed in the top positions in international rankings. Such initiatives are based on building institutional alliances to improve the quality, raise the competitiveness and enhance the international visibility of their major universities ([Kehm, 2006](#)).

The French example is illustrative of this approach. In 2007, the national legislation was amended to create 10 major "centres of excellence", a category that covers universities, research institutes and *grandes écoles*, and raise their visibility in international listings. Similarly, since 2005 Germany has been backing its "initiatives of excellence" or *Exzellenzinitiative* by creating a league of top universities ([Hazelkorn and Ryan, 2013](#)).

France launched its *Initiatives d'excellence* (IDEX) programme in the late 2010, endowing it with €7.7 billion to create five to ten institutions able to compete with the world's finest universities. The strategy entailed linking geographically aligned higher education and research institutions whose scientific and academic excellence was already acknowledged, with a view to raising their international visibility. These excellence initiatives are structured around particularly ambitious scientific projects in close partnership with the business community. An independent international jury selected eight

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