

International rankings of universities

The Holy Grail or the Alchemists' stone?

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In the dark all universities the same...



But with a little light...

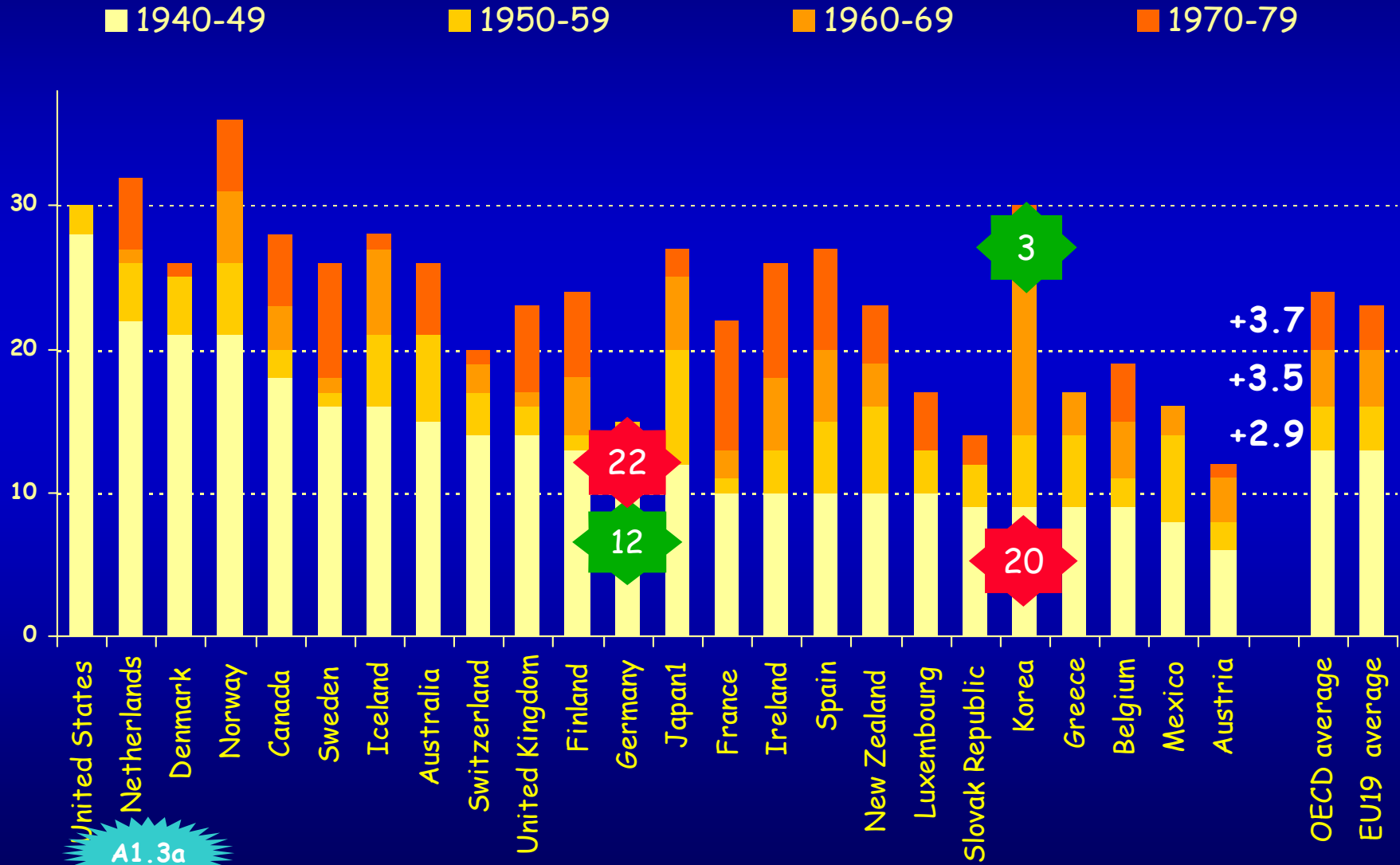
In the dark all universities look the same...



But with a little light...
...important differences become apparent...

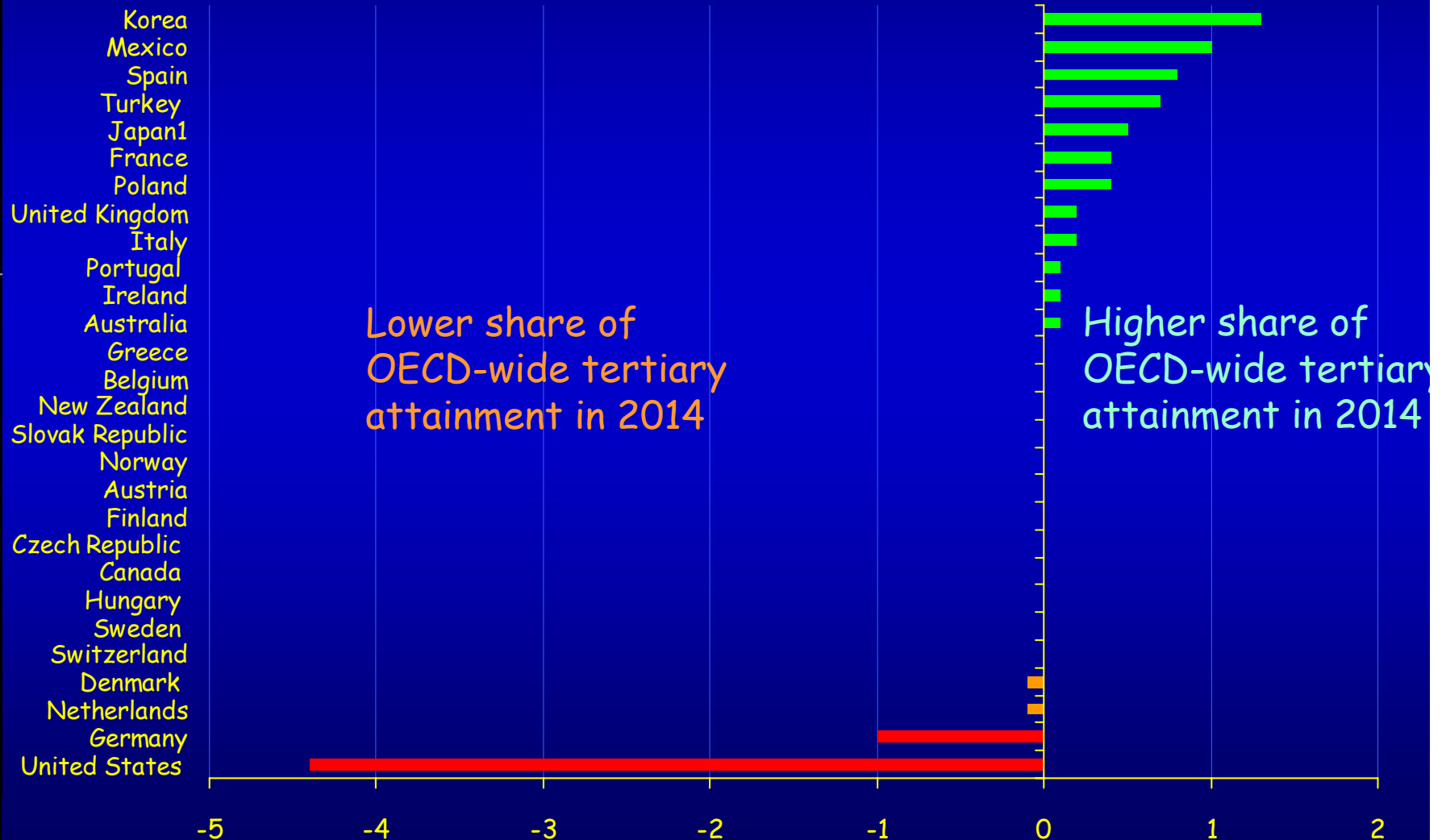
Growth in university-level qualifications

Approximated by the percentage of persons with ISCED 5A/6 qualification born in the period shown below (2004)



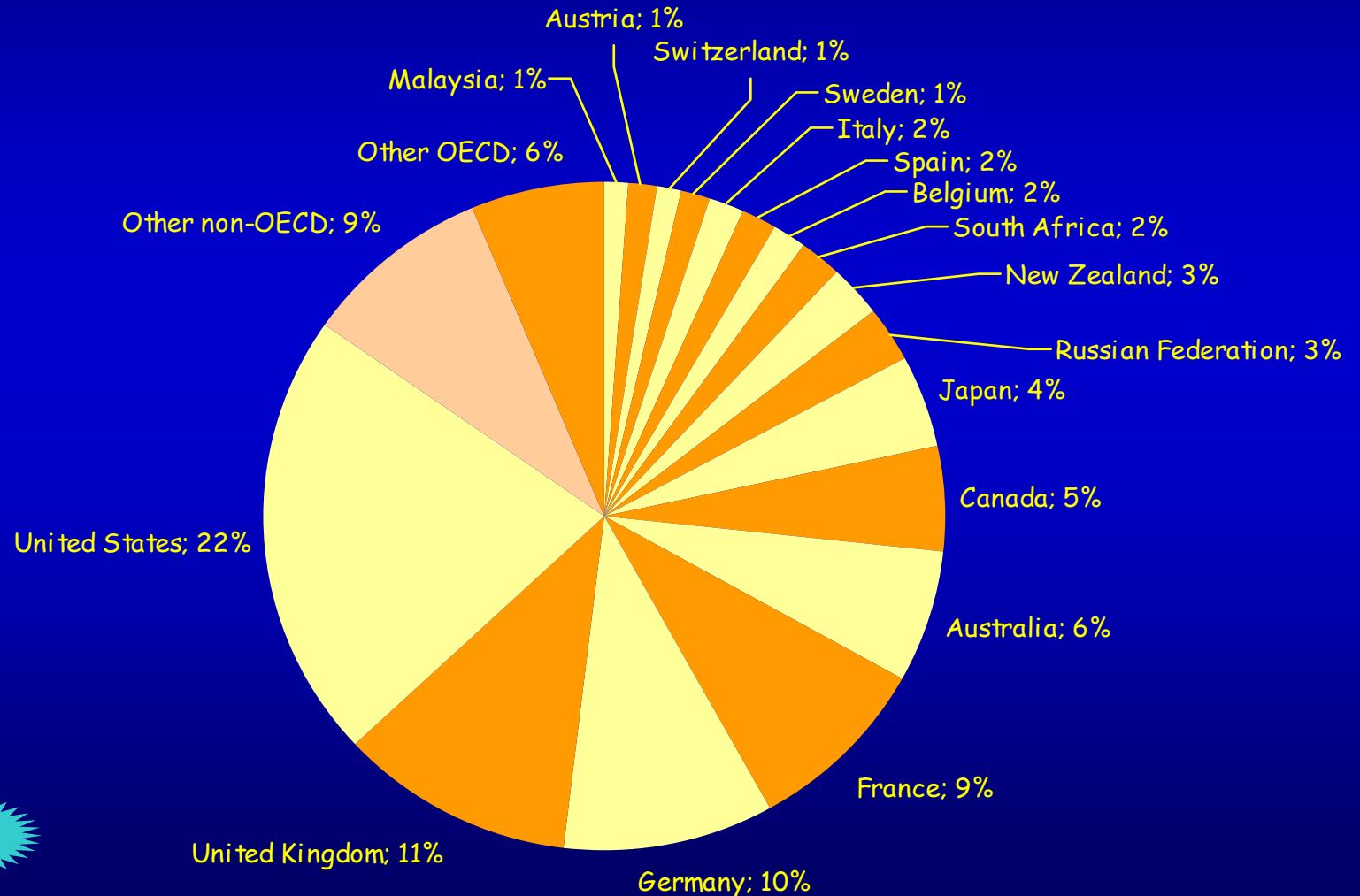
Shifts in countries' market share of the highly qualified

Number of 35-64-year-olds with tertiary type A qualifications
as a percentage of the OECD total



Borderless education: Where international students go

Percentage of foreign tertiary students reported to the OECD who are enrolled in each country of destination



International rankings of universities

The Holy Grail? Or the Alchemists' Stone?

- Know why you are looking
- Know what you are looking for
- Know how you'll recognise it when you find it
- Search systematically
- Remember that others are looking too



The Holy Grail? Or the Alchemists' Stone?
Know **why** you are looking

- Information feeding peer pressure and public accountability has become more powerful than legislation and regulation...

...and it has made international comparisons (and some international organisations) indispensable in the field of education that was thus far conceived a largely domestic area

The Holy Grail? Or the Alchemists' Stone?

Know what you are looking for

- The Holy Grail was a well-described object, and there was only one true grail
- Our problem:

$\langle O(t_o) \text{ (with } v_o), \text{ classified by } C(t_c), f(V(t_v)) \rangle$

- O there is world of difference in programme types and institutions
- V rankings will always remain highly sensitive to the variables that we are measuring, and on many rankings you can do well by changing your inputs, without any impact on results
- v_o there is no agreement on comparable properties of programmes and institutions...
- C ...nor on taxonomies to classify them

The Holy Grail? Or the Alchemists' Stone?

Know **how** you will know when you find it

- The Alchemists' stone was to be recognised by transforming ordinary metal into gold

- Our problem:
 - Rankings need to reflect
 - Central and enduring parts of universities that relate to quality of outcomes
 - Aspects that can be improved by purposeful action
 - Trading off breadth and depths
 - Not everything that is important needs to be dealt with with excruciating detail
 - Seek rankings that are as comparable as possible...
 - ... but as specific for universities as necessary
 - Focus coverage as much as feasible...
 - ... but keep as large as necessary to be useful for policy formation

The Holy Grail? Or the Alchemists' Stone?

Search systematically

- ❑ The medieval Alchemists' followed the dictates of a well-established science but that was built on wrong foundations
 - ❑ The search for the Holy Grail was overburdened by false clues and cryptic symbols
 - ❑ We need to do better...
 - Rankings are not absolutes or bright shining objects the very possession of which produces unbounded wealth
 - They are defined through a process bringing together political, methodological and ethical considerations
 - Good rankings should reflect what is expected of students and how well those expectations are translated into achieved outcomes
- ... and there is only one choice
- We do the rankings well or the media will continue to do them poorly

Key questions for an exploratory phase

□ What to assess ?

- Baseline transversal competencies
 - Easy to do, largely invariant across cultural and occupational contexts
 - Captures only small part of the value universities add to what is learned at schools
- Specialist competencies that universities provide
 - Challenges comparability across programmes, institutions and countries, new territory in methodological terms

□ Whom to assess ?

- Population near end of study or after defined number of years of study
 - Difficult to do because of variation in institutional structures, programme lengths and student populations served, both within and across countries
- Standardised age cohort
 - Instruments need to capture wide range in competencies

□ Units to survey and units of analysis ?

- Comparison of system performance
 - Maximises policy relevance for governments
 - Difficult to establish comparable samples and to incentivise institutional participation, variation in participation rates raise questions about interpretation of system performance
- Comparison of institutional performance
 - Maximises relevance for institutions, voluntary participation
 - Limits system-wide policy insights

- www.oecd.org
- www.pisa.oecd.org
 - All national and international publications
 - The complete micro-level database
- email: pisa@oecd.org
- Andreas.Schleicher@OECD.org

... and remember:

Without data, you are just another person
with an opinion

Thank you!