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Dawkins reforms bear fruit at Curtin University

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CURTIN University of Technology has cracked the top 500 in the world's most closely watched rankings for research universities, showing the progress made by new institutions lacking a long history of research funding.

Higher education commentator Simon Marginson hailed Curtin's performance as "the standout change" in the 2009 league table drawn up by Shanghai Jiao Tong University and released last week.

"This is really important for Curtin and also shows that the universities in the Australian Technology Network category can build to this status," Professor Marginson said.

"It has taken the Dawkins system a while to lift up institutions that were not pre-1987 universities but it has finally happened."

Curtin is the first member of the ATN Network to enter the 402-501 band of the Jiao Tong ranking. Australia has 17 universities in the top 500 and three in the top 100 with Sydney jumping three places to No 94, Melbourne slipping two places to No 75 and the Australian National University stable at No 59.

In the 402-501 band Curtin keeps company with universities such as La Trobe, James Cook and Swinburne, which also has entered the top 500 for the first time.

Curtin's vice-chancellor Jeanette Hackett said making the top 500 would help her university attract good research partners, staff and students.

The ranking vindicated Curtin's decision to concentrate its research firepower in four broad areas, among them resources and emerging science (such as radio astronomy). "We've been playing to our strengths," she said.

ATN executive director Vicki Thomson said the top 500 ranking was "a stellar effort".

"It's also indicative of the work that universities of our type have done over a relatively short time to build our research profile. We punch above our weight for our age profile," she said.

As a conference linked to the Jiao Tong rankings winds up in Shanghai today, the Times Higher Education magazine has announced "a root and branch" review of the contentious methodology for its global rankings.

Australian universities do better in the THE table than in the Jiao Tong partly because the former rewards universities that have plenty of international students and staff.

THE deputy editor Phil Baty said he believed these international measures would turn up in the revamped 2010 rankings "in some form" but every aspect of the methodology would be re-examined, including the academic peer review "centrepiece" of the rankings.

"It is always controversial to include subjective measures like peer review alongside more objective measures like citations, and the heavy weighting we gave to peer review in our rankings was particularly controversial," he said.

"Even with a much more rigorous peer review element, we'd still expect to perhaps reduce the weighting given to this measure."

Nothing had been decided. THE has ended its partnership with the company QS and struck an exclusive deal to use citation data from Thomson Reuters, freezing out Scopus and Google Scholar. Mr Baty said THE would devise a new methodology in consultation with Thomson, education experts and the academic community.

Professor Marginson said it seemed THE was moving closer to the Jiao Tong approach, which has a

heavy research bias.

"It has the feel of an effort to knock Shanghai Jiao Tong off its perch," he said.

"I suspect, though, that Jiao Tong will just continue regardless, relying on its now formidable reputation for honesty and consistency, which contrasts with the erratic changes in the Times approach in recent years.

"But if it leads to better data quality from the Times it can only be a good thing."

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