

Academic prestige

Why climb the greasy pole?

Getting a job at a top university will not make you a better researcher

May 10th 2014 | From the print edition

MOST academics would view a post at an elite university like Oxford or Harvard as the crowning achievement of a career—bringing both accolades and access to better wine cellars. But scholars covet such places for reasons beyond glory and gastronomy. They believe perching on one of the topmost branches of the academic tree will also improve the quality of their work, by bringing them together with other geniuses with whom they can collaborate and who may help spark new ideas. This sounds plausible. Unfortunately, as Albert-Laszlo Barabasi of Northeastern University, in Boston (and also, it must be said, of Harvard), shows in a study published in *Scientific Reports*, it is not true.

Dr Barabasi and his team examined the careers of physicists who began publishing between 1950 and 1980 and continued to do so for at least 20 years. They ranked the impact of the institutions these people attended by counting the number of citations each institution's papers received within five years of publication. By tracking the affiliations of individual physicists and counting their citations in a similar way, Dr Barabasi was able to work out whether moving from a low- to a high-ranking university improved a physicist's impact. In total, he and his team analysed 2,725 careers.

They found that, though an average physicist moved once or twice during his career, moving from a low-rank university to an elite one did not increase his scientific impact. Going in the opposite direction, however, did have a small negative influence.

The upshot is that elite universities do not, at least as far as physicists are concerned, add value to output. That surprising conclusion is one which the authorities in countries such as Britain, who are seeking to concentrate expensive subjects such as physics in fewer, more elite institutions—partly to save money, but also to create what are seen as centres of excellence—might wish to consider.

From the print edition: Science and technology