

Do university rankings truly measure up?

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Published: 29/07/2011 at 12:00 AM
Newspaper section: [News](#)

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It is May 27, 2011 and two media reports about Thai higher education tell very opposite stories. On one hand, a feel-good news item published in The Nation newspaper trumpets that 5 Thai universities were ranked among the top 100 in the QS Asian University Rankings 2011. Turn the pages of the Bangkok Post, however, and the editorial "Get real about bad education" laments the sorry state of quality at the country's colleges and universities.



Wishing for a brighter future: Every November, students celebrate the Loy Krathong cultural festival at the pond in Chulalongkorn University. Thailand's "modern knowledge management enterprises"—universities—are in need of extroverted and visionary leadership.

So who is to be believed?

This tale of two headlines offers useful instruction about the pitfalls of our new obsession with university rankings. Though they capture considerable press attention, international university rankings are not measuring all that is great about universities and their true worth to society.

Moreover, in the race to have their top national institutes climb the ladders of the world's competitive league tables, many countries are in fact racing to the bottom by not providing quality, relevant education systems for their citizens.

Although some assessments of universities' outputs occurred as far back as the mid-19th century, it really wasn't until the 1980s that public analyses of educational institutions became popularised in the mainstream media.

Fast forward to today, and we see that higher education is now a borderless global public good. With the worldwide marketplace for higher education projected to reach some 250 million students in 2025, rankings advocates say cross-national comparisons of the strength of institutions are a necessary way to impose international benchmarks.

Nowadays university rankings are the rage all around the world, and over 50 countries have national rankings. Americans read the US News and World Report, Australia has its The Good Universities Guide and Canada is home to the well-read Maclean's University Ranking. There are also a number of global rankings with an alphabet soup of names, acronyms and brands such as Times Higher Education, QS World University Rankings and Academic Ranking of World Universities. It's all very big business, as there are over 15,000 higher education institutions around the world that can potentially be ranked.

The question then becomes: What is being measured, and why?

Amid the plethora of methodologies and criteria used to compare, say, university A with university B, quantitative data sets generally pinpoint strengths in teaching, research and international reputation of faculty and students. Assessing these traditional criteria one result almost always emerges — either Harvard University or Britain's famed "Oxbridge" are crowned the world's best, along with a smattering of the other American Ivy League and California-based rivals.

Not surprisingly, all are also tops in terms of financial endowments reaching many billions of dollars. Harvard's endowment in 2009 was about US\$26 billion, about the size of the GDP of Panama and larger than the economies of 98 countries.

For these globally-focused comprehensive universities possessing similar resources and orientation, uniform rankings are probably useful.

Indeed, arguing the relative merits of the scholarship happening at Cambridge, Massachusetts versus Cambridge, England is a fair debate, and even a fun pursuit. However, very few universities in developing countries can ever afford to compete with the finances available to these super-elite universities, to avail of the world's who's-who of intellectual talent, and to pick and choose from what is considered as cutting-edge research.

But even if they could, should they even try? Probably not, said experts at a recent forum organised by the United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organisation, the Institutional Management of Higher Education and the World Bank. Rather than trying to "keep up with the Joneses" and conforming to the prevailing mono-culture approach to higher education by funnelling scarce public funds to create flagship universities, governments would be advised to ignore the rankings altogether.

Better to focus on the entire education system from kindergarten to post-graduate levels, to produce sufficiently skilled citizens who can benefit from inclusive socio-economic growth.

It's sometimes said that it is "what is counted" that counts. If true, it's time to employ arithmetic that adds, subtracts, multiplies and divides new indicators for those universities too often left out of traditional rankings.

Here the emphasis would be on relevance, value and impact of scholarship. For example, categories could be created, weighted and tilted in favour of the overall added-value a particular school contributes to society and to improving people's well-being through progressive education, skills development, appropriate vocational training, respect for principles of corporate social responsibility and community investment.

Indeed, one wonders just how many university rankings would be reversed if they were litmus-tested along the principle of "Do as I teach, not as I do"?

Development of the whole individual also requires appraisal of character, values and personality, important things which are not measured _ but should be. In an age when social inequality is on the rise, surely it's a reasonable idea to tally a university's ability to educate socially-conscious graduates. At a moment in history when energy, water and food are defining issues in a world frightened by the prospects of resource scarcity, population growth and climate change, shouldn't scholarly research and real life societal outreach done by universities in the developing world be worth just as much to a school's reputation, as the number of Nobel laureates on the faculty of a university in the West?

How about putting schools' sustainable development, poverty reduction and green curricula up for competitive review and critique?

Beyond simply measuring the number of international students at a school, wouldn't counting the number of students from least developed countries indicate a school's true commitment to internationality and global development?

A poor indicator currently used is the number of foreign nationalities "represented" at a university, which does not review the real weight and quality of its inter-cultural responsiveness. It is time to evaluate "expatriatism" as a more precise appraisal of extroverted attitudes, just as it is done in many other business sectors. Expatriatism could be rated by monitoring the extent of third-culture populations at universities, foreign-national ratios, North-South composition for students and professors, as well as multilateralism of shareholders and the international geographical location of campuses.

Extroverted and visionary leadership of "modern knowledge management enterprises" (read: universities) could be measured by assessing the ratio of teaching, research and outreach directly linked to the attainment of the UN Millennium Development Goals and to the advancement of human rights agendas _ all factors which are essential drivers of the world's capacity to respond to global risks and fulfil humankind's hopes for justice and freedom.

Any top-down, one-size-fits-all approach to universities that eschews diversity is an uninspiring model for humanity. A new paradigm or "social engagement scorecard" for ranking universities across the world would instead break free of homogenised evaluation regimens and make the rankings more productive for countries struggling to improve the quality of their entire education systems.

Such an approach would value the complexity that exists in academia. It would recognise the inherent worth of institutions' mission statements within national, regional and global development scenarios and cultural contexts.

Ultimately, viewing the rich contributions of universities through a new set of lenses could catapult many erstwhile also-rans into the rarified air of "the world's best".

And any university that wishes to be ranked amongst the world's best should also be happy to compete "to make the world better".

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