

Stepping out of the uni-ranking race

They make news, but are global university rankings that relevant for Singapore? It may be better to assess universities' quality here by their stated objectives.



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When a local university here rises to the top tiers of ranking tables, it is often headline news that generates interest from educationists, parents and prospective students.

There are many global rankings or regional league tables. There are also rankings by subjects, graduate employability and reputation.

Such lists that pit universities against each other have proliferated over the years.

But how useful and relevant are these rankings?

Not terribly. At least that appears to be the conclusion of an international panel of academics and industry representatives who were in Singapore last month.

Education Minister Ong Ye Kung, in summarising their discussion, said: "There is strong consensus around the table and among all the education leaders of the world, that the current ranking system is actually rather crude and one-size-fits-all, and actually not that relevant compared with what we want to achieve."

The 11-member International Academic Advisory Panel, which was assembled to advise the Education Ministry on university trends, recommended instead that Singapore find ways to assess its universities differently based on their missions.

Mr Ong has said that more varied measurements are needed as each of Singapore's six autonomous universities has its own focus, and social and economic mission.

PUTTING SINGAPORE ON THE WORLD STAGE

Still, university officials said that global rankings, if taken in the right spirit, are a gauge of where an institution stands.

The league tables have helped put Singapore's two biggest universities – the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU) –

on the global map, and attracted students and faculty here.

Both have consistently fared well in these annual charts, usually shifting a few notches up and down over time.

Two oft-cited rankings are published by consultancies like Times Higher Education and Quacquarelli Symonds (QS). These ranking exercises help to boost readership and advertising revenue for the companies.

In the QS World University Rankings released last month, NUS and NTU came in 11th and 12th respectively, with NUS emerging as Asia's top university.

Last year, the same list ranked NTU at 11th and NUS at 15th.

NUS president Tan Eng Chye said the rankings have increased the profile of both universities overseas. "If any foreigner wants to study in Asia, NUS and NTU will naturally come up as choices. They have been a useful platform for us to recruit very good students and faculty members."

The rankings have also served as indicators of progress.

Take NTU, for example. As its president Subra Suresh pointed out, a university's trajectory should be seen over a period of time.

From 74th in 2011 in the QS ranking, NTU has climbed to 12th spot this year. "The point here, therefore, is not where precisely NTU is year on year, but how far it has moved up in a decade or so, which is significant and noteworthy," he said.

In determining the universities' rung on the ladder, these publications use a mix of performance indicators that assess their abilities in research, teaching, employability and international outlook.

A high weightage – about 60 per cent for QS and Times Higher Education – is devoted to research.

This covers how productive and influential a university is in research, often by counting citations – the number of times a published work is cited by scholars globally.

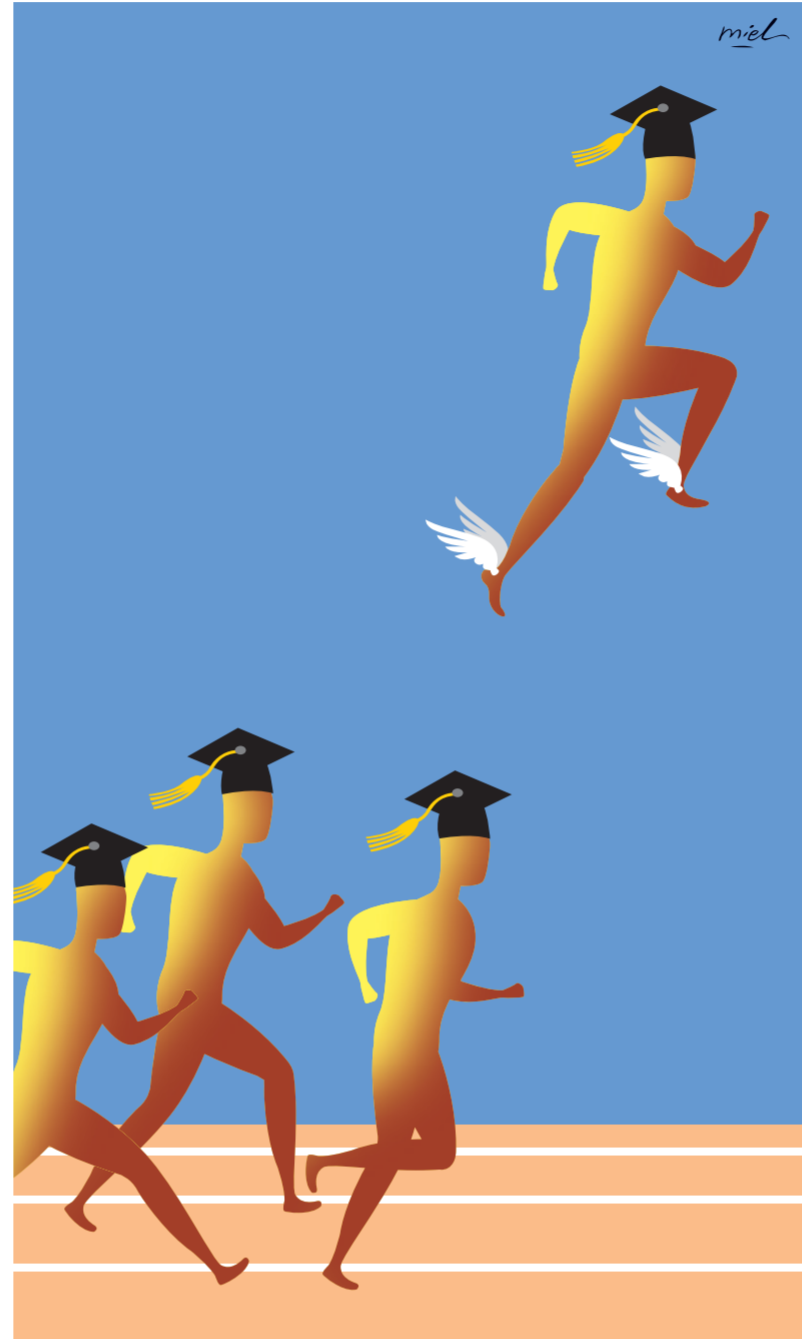
It also includes surveying academics in the higher education space and what they think of a university's prestige, teaching and research quality.

Times Higher Education Global Rankings editorial director Phil Baty said earlier this year that its current methodology was developed "based on more than a decade of experience in rankings, after more than a year of open consultation and with the detailed expert input of more than 50 leading figures across the world".

THE PROBLEM WITH RANKINGS

But organisations that rank universities have been criticised for focusing too heavily on research prowess, which privileges large broad-based universities.

Some rankings also rely on perception surveys canvassing the opinions of academics around the world, which critics say are biased



towards the old legacy universities of the West.

Other rankings conducted by the US News and Thomson Reuters primarily focus on research ability, which may not be as relevant to students.

Another well-known table is the Academic Ranking of World Universities, started in 2003 by the Shanghai Jiao Tong University.

But this was designed to help Chinese universities rate themselves against the rest of the world. The list, now maintained by the ShanghaiRanking Consultancy, also relies heavily on research such as the number of articles published in academic journals and the number of Nobel Prize winners a university has produced.

Singapore University of Technology and Design president Chong Tow Chong said: "Current university rankings are mostly a form of relative comparison based on a certain set of criteria solely determined by the entity that conducts the rankings."

And these indicators are typically those that are readily available and possible to measure, said experts.

Professor Stephen Toope, vice-chancellor of Cambridge University, said: "Rankings are an

ABSTRACT FACTORS NOT CAPTURED

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NUS PRESIDENT TAN ENG CHYE, on the limitations of rankings.

agglomeration of a lot of different component parts. Sometimes when you pull too many different things together and get one number, that number is pretty misleading."

For one, they evaluate teaching environment using faculty-to-student ratios or the number of staff with PhDs, but gloss over more abstract aspects of the students' learning experience, like internships or career preparation –

areas that universities are paying more attention to now.

Said NUS' Professor Tan: "If you look at student-to-faculty ratio, it just measures the number of warm bodies but doesn't study in detail the quality of teaching and learning."

"Environmental factors that are hard to measure are not captured," he said, naming initiatives that rankings do not account for, like residential colleges and overseas colleges where NUS students learn the ropes of entrepreneurship.

SIDELINING SMALLER INSTITUTIONS

Another limitation of mass global rankings is that they often do injustice to niche colleges and universities, said academics.

Singapore now has six public universities, after the Government expanded university pathways to keep pace with industry needs.

But the younger institutions are not represented on the global charts because of their small faculty and student bodies.

They also do not churn out as much research in journals, partly because of their different missions.

An institution like the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS), primarily a teaching-based university and a lifelong learning institute that prepares graduates for the workplace, is disadvantaged as a result.

Its president, Professor Cheong Hee Kiat, said: "The type of research we do are more applied in nature and may attract fewer citations. It is therefore not sensible to compare SUSS with other universities that have different missions."

"Universities exist for many good reasons – not just to create knowledge but also to disseminate knowledge, and to educate graduates who can contribute to the economy and society."

The other smaller universities have strengths which may not be captured by rankings.

SUTD, which took in its first students in 2012, has co-developed with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology a curriculum that infuses design into their engineering, architecture and information systems courses.

The Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) has a flagship work-study programme – an eight-to-12-month work stint that gives students more depth in their chosen field.

SIT academics also work closely with industry. Said its president, Professor Tan Thiam Soon: "Much of the research is not about publications but about its impact on our partners and, in doing so, contributes to the nation's economic prosperity."

Singapore Management University (SMU) provost Lily Kong noted that the criteria for commercial rankings "disadvantage specialised universities and applied universities". When compared

against more comprehensive universities, SMU – classified as a specialist institution, which has one or two faculty areas – does not fare as well.

"However, if we were to undertake our own exercise of comparing the specialist universities in QS' list, SMU is ranked 10th in the world," she said.

Similarly, liberal arts colleges in the United States such as Williams College and Amherst College, both highly regarded colleges in Massachusetts, are not included in the global rankings.

HOW TO ASSESS UNIVERSITIES

Still, academics say universities should be assessed to make sure they are on the right track.

Prof Chong said it is more meaningful to invest in assessing the quality and impact of Singapore's six universities based on their objectives.

Evaluating teaching quality is important, and it goes beyond looking at faculty-to-student ratios, said Prof Tan of NUS.

"We collect student feedback for every module, have peer reviews where professors sit in colleagues' classes... We put pressure on those who don't fare well."

And, as Mr Ong said, measurements of universities have to be more holistic. "At the minimum, it has to reflect our three major emphases.

"One, the value of education; two, how we are doing in terms of lifelong learning; and three, research, and not just research in terms of publications and patents but how it translates into impact – whether it's in improving lives or creating jobs."

Prof Kong said that obtaining students' views on their learning experience and how well the university has prepared them for work and life is one way of getting a more holistic picture of what it has done.

"It is also important to hear employers' views about the graduates and their contributions over the long term."

Students need to look at the qualities of universities that matter to them, experts said, rather than just where they stand on these charts.

Said Prof Toope: "For an individual student, he or she has to be thinking about specific programmes that are the most well-suited for the desires and aspirations of that student."

"And sometimes a global ranking tells you absolutely nothing about an individual programme."

Singapore, as a small country with a few universities that serve different roles, should not pay too much attention to such rankings, said Prof Toope.

"Rankings tend to pull everyone back to a mean and make it seem as if there is only one model of university that is right. I think that is a fundamental misconception."

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