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The relentless pursuit of university rankings is creating a two-track system

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SINGAPORE: Global university rankings constructed mainly by Western commercial media outlets, like this week's Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) Asia University Rankings, seem to be a perennial source of interest in Singapore.

Yet, rankings have well-known limitations.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) and university leaders frequently deny that they motivate policy or are a basis for institutional evaluation. But they do provide a convenient way to ascertain if universities meet our aspirations for world-class status.

At the same time, because rankings tend to emphasise research publications of global significance, there is some skepticism among academics and the general public everywhere of their value to local communities.

This is because high university rankings do not cause or even correlate with national or local economic performance. Nor are there empirical studies anywhere that link them definitively to individual student outcomes like post-graduation job placement or salary rates.

Such outcomes are more heavily determined by students' ability and prior academic preparation (e.g. as reflected in their entry test scores), market demand for the majors they choose to study (e.g. starting salaries are higher for engineering and business than for arts and social sciences grads), and other individual characteristics such as job preference, gender, personality, networks and even luck.

Local job market conditions reflecting demographic, macroeconomic and sectoral developments also heavily influence graduates' job prospects, as does individual effort in university, the job-search process, and early career stages.

All these factors are highly variable, and longitudinal data are scarce: One cannot even conclude that lifetime earnings are determined by field of study, let alone by the ranking of one's university at the time of matriculation.

DO NOT REFLECT QUALITY OF EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Rankings based on academic research also do not necessarily reflect the quality of students' educational experience or their satisfaction.

Markets recognise this, in Singapore as elsewhere. Thus, there is no evidence that students or employers have a strong preference for graduates from the National University of Singapore (NUS) over graduates from the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), despite the former's superior rankings performance over more than a decade.

Nor does the Singapore Management University's (SMU) unranked status cause it to be disfavoured by students or employers relative to NUS and NTU.

In the US, where there is a very large, heterogeneous higher education ecosystem, graduates from highly-ranked universities do tend to have better market outcomes than those from lower-ranked institutions.

But this mostly reflects input factors like more selective student admissions (seen in higher entry test scores) and greater financial resources (seen in more financial aid so students do not have to work to support themselves since this prolongs time-to-graduation, a rankings outcome measure).

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Highly-ranked universities are also geographically concentrated in high-cost urban job markets on the Northeast Coast where wages are higher.

The corollary in Singapore is the high-PISA-performing graduates of our competitive, stressful primary and secondary school system, who readily gain admission into elite undergraduate programs at highly-ranked universities overseas.

But most Singaporeans who study abroad (including Government scholars) choose universities that are lower-ranked than NUS and NTU, such as those in Australia, Canada and many US state universities. They are not penalised by employers, including the Government, for that.

The vast majority of foreign talent employed in Singapore are also not graduates of top-ranked global universities. Many come from unranked Asian universities yet manage to find good jobs in Singapore.

This adds weight to the argument that rankings do not matter, except possibly as a marginal status consumption good for the individual and his/her employer.

What about the national pride that Singaporeans might derive from the high global rankings of our national universities?

As the contrast between the local responses to Joseph Schooling's versus women's table tennis Olympics victories shows, national pride may be diminished if high rankings are due to the elevation of foreign over local talent and content.

WHAT RANKINGS ARE BASED ON

Rankings like those by Times Higher Education (THE) and QS, where NUS and NTU do well, are heavily based on bibliometrics - the number of research publications in highly-ranked international peer-reviewed academic journals, and the citation counts which emerge from them.

Universities can perform well on these metrics if they specifically hire and promote faculty from anywhere in the world who produce such metrics, including those who do so while remaining employed at other institutions.

Because such metrics favour research that is universally-generalisable and theoretically-driven, they are less likely to include context-specific research on Singapore, which is more likely to be undertaken by Singaporean faculty.

This is one of many reasons why the proportion of local tenure-track faculty in our universities has dropped, particularly at junior levels, even though the number of Singaporeans earning PhD degrees has increased.

Rankings also favour universities which have more international students. In the US, this privileges private universities over public ones, because the latter's public funding requires them to favour "in-state" students in undergraduate admissions.

In Singapore, it is sometimes argued that rankings help attract more international students, which in turn helps us to rise in the rankings.

But international students also do not appear to favour highly-ranked NUS and NTU over SMU and the other unranked universities. Instead they choose universities for a range of reasons, including costs, scholarship availability, field of study, word-of-mouth reputation, and likelihood of a work visa and employment after graduation.

At the post-graduate level, Singapore universities attract a lot of students from other Asian countries, particularly in STEM fields, where they receive generous grants including tuition waivers, income stipends, and opportunities to work with research-prolific faculty, most of whom are foreign staff themselves.

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A Singapore post-graduate degree enables them to then enter good universities abroad as PhD students or postdoctoral fellows.

A TWO-TRACK SYSTEM

Rankings thus matter to these students, but what Singapore the nation gets out of it - other than more research publications, higher rankings, and possibly useful global research networks - is uncertain.

This route to rankings success is also becoming more difficult now that Chinese universities are following the same path of “buying research” at larger scale - hiring hundreds of (mostly Chinese) postdocs to churn out research publications.

In non-STEM fields like business, arts and social sciences, Singapore’s autonomous universities are expected by MOE to be self-funding or revenue-generating. This creates pressure to expand class size and enrollments of full-fee paying students, including international students, which risks lowering standards and quality of the educational experience.

Prioritising research-focused rankings also diverts scarce institutional resources from teaching to research. Thus, in highly-ranked research universities around the world, tenure-track research faculty are assigned lighter teaching loads so they can devote more time to churning out all-important research publications.

A disproportionate teaching burden is thus borne by faculty on the teaching or practice track, and by an army of floating adjuncts, though there is little evidence that they are better teachers than research-track faculty.

In Singapore, the vast majority of teaching faculty, adjuncts, and faculty at the unranked “teaching universities” of the Singapore Institute of Technology and the newly autonomous Singapore University of Social Sciences (formerly UniSIM) are Singaporeans, who have much less time and resources to do research, which would focus more heavily on Singapore-relevant topics.

Following rankings gives tenure-track research faculty higher status, salaries and power within academic departments, and it is they who assume academic leadership positions.

This two-track system thus results in Singaporean faculty being clustered in universities and faculty ranks of perceived lower status, with inferior employment terms, and less institutional power, than foreign faculty who dominate higher status universities and ranks.

National pride is unlikely to emerge from such a system, which may even generate an inferiority complex. It also exacts opportunity costs in terms of lesser resources for local faculty, less locally-oriented research, and a greater claim on scarce public funds than would otherwise be the case.

In short, pursuing high university rankings is not only unlikely to benefit Singapore and Singaporeans, it may also have unintended negative consequences, and for little if any gain in rankings themselves.

In the THE ranking, for example, NUS ranks 22 for 2018, but was 18 in 2004, before our universities were corporatised, and when the majority of faculty were Singaporeans.

This does not mean that we should always favour Singaporean faculty, since the pursuit of knowledge is agnostic to nationality.

But if chasing after rankings is producing adverse effects and creating unwanted divides, it is worth reviewing our goals for doing so.

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who served on a task force advising the Steering Committee on University Autonomy, Governance and Finance for the Ministry of Education in 2004.

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