UNIVERSITY RANKINGS

What makes a good university?

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THE Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint says that by 2025 Malaysia should have two universities in the global top 100 of the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranking of universities (QS is a company that focuses on providing higher education services). Another two universities should be in the top 200. Three Malaysian universities (UM, UPM and UTM) are currently ranked in the top 300, with the highest being Universiti Malaya, ranked at 133.

The QS rankings are recognised as one of the leading indicators of a good university. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Harvard, Cambridge and Oxford all appear in the top ten. Most people would agree that these universities are amongst the best in the world, even in the absence of any other data, so the QS rankings do have credibility.

Given the aspirations of the Ministry of Higher Education it is worth looking at how QS rank universities, to gauge the challenge ahead for Malaysia.

Academic reputation accounts for 40% of the QS ranking. This data is collected by a global survey, where academics are asked to identify which are the best institutions in the world. For the 2016-17 rankings, 74,651 academics contributed to the survey.

Another 10% is based on employer reputation. Again, this is based on a global survey, which asked employers which institutions produces the best graduates.

20% is based on student-to-faculty ratio. This measures the ratio of students to staff, with higher marks being awarded if a university has a high proportion of staff as this encourages small class teaching.

To measure the impact of a university's research the QS rankings looks at the citations that its research attracts. A citation means that some research from the university is referred to (cited) within another piece of research. This data is collected automatically, using one of the standard scientific bibliographic databases. This element accounts for 20%.

The final two elements, which are worth 5% each, measure how many international staff and international students the university has.

If Malaysia wants to get two (public) universities into the top 100, those universities need to be aiming for an overall score of 62.8, which

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is the overall score of the universities (four are currently tied) that currently occupy this position.

Many would argue that this metric driven way of ranking universities is wrong and it is more about what universities provide in the local and national context. For example, what Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities do they undertake?

Becoming increasingly important is engagement with business and how a university helps job and wealth creation. It is no longer good enough for a university to churn out high quality graduates that hope to get a well-paid job. Governments are more and more looking to university graduates to have an entrepreneurial nature so that they can start companies, create jobs, contribute to the country's gross domestic product (GDP) and its expand its export market.

So, what makes a good university? It depends who you are, but the QS rankings are what most aspire to, and this is not an exception in Malaysia who have mentioned it explicitly in the Higher Education Blueprint. It will be tough to get two public universities in the top 100, but that does not mean it is not worth trying.

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