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# Criteria for distinction

**A. MURAD MERICAN** raises questions about the findings of the Rating System for Malaysian Higher Education 2007.



UM Chancellor Sultan Azlan Muhibbuddin Shah (centre) after the convocation ceremony last year. Setara rated the university the only excellent tertiary institution in Malaysia

UNIVERSITY of Malaya is the only excellent tertiary institution in Malaysia.

That is according to the Rating System for Malaysian Higher Education 2007 (or its Malay acronym Setara). The findings were released recently.

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) were rated "very good" (research intensive university category) and the same was used to describe Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia (UIAM) and Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) (broad-based university category).

The exercise, approved by the Cabinet in 2005, was conducted by a five-member team led by Professor Che Husna Azhan, Director of the Institute of the Malay World and Civilisation at UKM, and co-ordinated by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency.

One of the rationale for Setara was for Malaysian public universities to continuously improve their positions in the world rankings.

Much can be argued on the subject and much should be deliberated in scrutinising the institution of the university in Malaysia.

That is because the stakeholders are numerous — and there are too many priorities. Many universities may focus on funding, some on policy, others on students and yet others on professors.

We trust the Setara team has been exhaustive in examining other rating and ranking systems — the more visible being the *Times Higher Education Supplement* World University Rankings and the Shanghai Jiao Tong University Academic Ranking of World Universities.

Consider also the Webometrics Ranking of World Universities by the Cybermetrics Lab, which is a part of the National Research Council of Spain, Paris Professional Ranking of World Universities set up last year, the Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council of Taiwan's 2007 Performance Ranking of Scientific Papers for World Universities and *Newsweek* Top 100 Global Universities.

In addition, there are regional and national rankings such as those conducted by the European Commission, the Canadian magazine *Maclean's* University Rankings and the weekly *India Today* Top 10 Colleges in India.

Universities are organisational paradoxes.

They are complex and they can be as archaic as they look. At the same time, they are at the cutting edge of new knowledge; the university and its environment tap the first thought, they create the future.

The Setara exercise is to be carried out once every two years and would in future include private universities.

It involves a quantitative survey where data collected is analysed based on 87 indicators under six domains: academic staff (25 per cent); students' selectivity (10 per cent); research (15 per cent); academic programmes (25 per cent); resources (15 per cent) and management (10 per cent).

The criteria used for assessing a university's performance must be transparent as questions arise beginning with the operational definition of a research-intensive university as against the broad-based and specialised ones. Certainly these are not mutually exclusive.

There are more questions. Do the 87 indicators — and what are these? — accurately measure what are intended to be quantified?

For example, what is meant by excellence in research and that of academic staff?

The indicators are supposed to give stakeholders an idea as to what needs to be done to improve the quality of Malaysia's universities.

For one, information on the categories of universities must be made public.

How many representations can a university make? A university can be broad-based and research intensive at the same time.

Universities are generally broad-based and multidisciplinary in their composition. Conceptually, all universities are research institutions.

What criteria did the Setara team use to define the categories? Did the team study the size and nature of the fields offered by the universities? Were the organs of the universities — faculties, departments, centres, institutes and other functional units — taken into account? Were the number of campuses a university has considered?

Several universities in Malaysia have

Rating System for Malaysian Higher Education 2007 Ranking	
EXCELLENT	● University of Malaya
VERY GOOD	● Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia ● Universiti Putra Malaysia ● Universiti Teknologi Mara ● Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia
GOOD	● Universiti Sains Malaysia ● Universiti Malaysia Sabah ● Universiti Malaysia Sarawak ● Universiti Teknologi Malaysia
SATISFACTORY	● Universiti Teknologi Tun Hussien Onn Malaysia ● Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris ● Universiti Malaysia Perlis ● Universiti Malaysia Terengganu ● Universiti Utara Malaysia ● Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia ● Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Malacca ● Universiti Malaysia Pahang

many institutes and centres while others have a few.

How was this measured? How would universities with medical faculties and hospitals be judged? Would the teaching hospitals and their various research initiatives be assessed as a part of the medical faculty or a separate component?

How did UiTM get into the picture?

The university was founded on affirmative action. It has a captive market. It is non-competitive. It does not need to advertise and promote itself.

It has branches and city campuses like no other university in Malaysia. The process of student selection differs greatly from other tertiary institutions.

How did the Setara team evaluate this exception?

Curiously enough, UiTM was paired with UIAM in the "very good" classification.

UIAM is an international university that critically needs to promote and project itself outside Malaysia for faculty and student intake.

Did the Setara team take into account the contrasting philosophies of student recruitment in both institutions? One is affirmative Bumiputera-based and the other blind to ethnic origin and nationality.

There is a vast array of factors that differentiate UIAM from UiTM. Yet both are categorised as broad-based by the Setara team.

The so-called broad-based, rather multidisciplinary component of UIAM (and for that matter UM, UKM and Universiti Sains Malaysia) is different from that of UiTM.

Did the Setara team examine the nature of programmes offered? There is a difference between programme-based offerings and discipline-based ones.



The Setara team must appraise and compare programme-based courses with discipline-based ones among universities in Malaysia and measure them against those of the world's top 10.

I am thinking along the lines of why journalism was not taken up by UM in the early 1970s.

The reason then was that journalism was a trade/vocational subject.

Were trade/vocational programmes — and this would also depend on perceptions — considered in the Setara exercise?

How did the Setara team assess citations? If we aspire to be among the top 10 universities in the world, why are the Setara findings silent on publications and citations?

After all, a university is not just the place to teach and transmit knowledge and values, it is also a place to indulge in intellectual production besides creating and interpreting new knowledge through papers published in peer-reviewed journals.

These come from a conglomerate of schools, faculties, departments, teams, clusters and individual scientists and scholars working in different fields.

Did the Setara team satisfactorily grapple with the diverse fields in the sciences and the humanities as reflected in publications and citations?

The Thomson Scientific Essential Science Indicators module Web of Knowledge, gives the example of "Clinical Medicine" as being treated as a single field (including 1790 journals and over 1,500,000 author names in the last decade).

If assessment on citations was carried out — and this was not disclosed — was it based on the year being reviewed or over several years?

Again, the Setara team's initiative needs to recognise differences across citation databases, errors in automated citation counts, self-citation, different citation rates across the fields and non-standardised handling of group authorship papers.

These pose some measurement errors. Have these been thoroughly looked into?

If we do not want to play second-rate scientists and scholars, then we have to produce and lead the



Visitors take a closer look at a miniature model at a UIAM festival. UIAM is in the "very good" classification

publication of journals and be cited.

It appears that we are de-emphasising citation densities but these are a critical criterion in *The Times* and Shanghai rankings.

Although citations are not always reflective of approval of a scholarly and scientific work, they do reflect its contribution to the debate in a field.

In relation to that, if we aspire to scientific and social advancement, and are concerned with the relevancy of offerings by our universities, we also need to rate and rank different categories of disciplines and fields.

The rating would necessarily have to be focused and not deflect its critical importance, because that is where the rigour of thought, methodology and corpus come into play.

Although the groupings may be arbitrary, future ratings would have to deliberate and disclose the competitiveness of such categories in Malaysia as an estimation of where we are at internationally.

The Shanghai list categorised five fields for separate ranking: Natural Sciences and Mathematics; Engineering/Technology and Computer Sciences; Life and Agricultural Sciences; Clinical Medicine and Pharmacy; and Social Sciences. The list exclude Arts and Humanities, and Psychology/Psychiatry.

We can create different categories and include Arts and Humanities as a separate category, place Psychology in the Social Sciences and Psychiatry in Clinical Medicine.

Although the overall criteria for evaluating disciplines and fields are similar, there should be some modifications to suit the peculiarities of each field.

These modifications may apply for a number of articles in "top" high-impact journals per field, unlike articles in, say, *Nature* or *Science*.

"Top" or to use the term "tier one" journals are determined according to impact factors.

These may be applicable to the various fields in Science, Engineering and Technology

but not necessarily in the Social Sciences and Humanities.

Again, the Setara team must be wise enough to know that certain things are not comparable across the disciplines.

Territoriality (a common trait among academics and scientists, and Malaysians are not excluded) must be suspended at the time of evaluation.

The Malaysian rating system has to seriously (if it had not done so) scrutinise the "beef" and not things such as resources and management.

We have to zero in on the essentials of what make a university and not cover our weaknesses.

Like it or not, the Higher Education Ministry's announcement would have some impact on local tertiary institutions.

The general sentiment is that Malaysian universities have to do the right thing.

What is the worth of our universities among the 15,000 universities and more than 5,000 research centres worldwide (according to a database from Webometrics)?

Would an "Islamic" ranking exercise among universities in the Organisation of Islamic Conference countries be a way to dispel the image of mediocrity that haunts Malaysian tertiary education? And is that the right way to measure our universities?

Whatever the future holds, the university is a celebration of the authority of ideas and not the primacy of authority.

■ Professor A. Murad Merican dabbles and works with ideas and is based at the Department of Management and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS, Bandar Seri Iskandar, Perak. He can be contacted at [amurad\\_noormerican@petronas.com.my](mailto:amurad_noormerican@petronas.com.my)

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UiTM Diploma of Science students conduct an experiment. The process of student selection at UiTM differs from other tertiary institutions