

Are rankings relevant at all?

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak

Comment

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FIVE Malaysian universities were ranked among the top institutions in the 2010 QS Asian University Rankings. While some cheered and reckoned this is deservedly so -- considering the hard work -- others felt it is about time.

At Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), however, most were amused by the news for the simple reason that they have neither agreed to the invitation to participate nor have they submitted any data or information.

Nevertheless, USM has been assigned a meaningless "number".

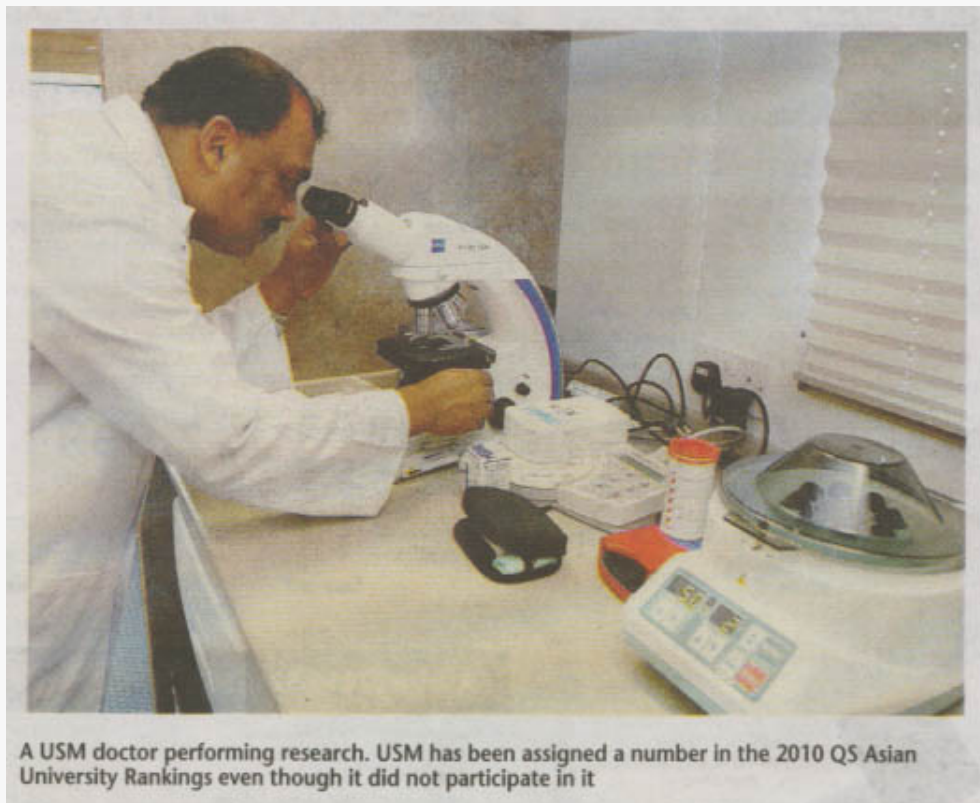
Early in the year, the university took a firm stand on not participating in the newly minted QS, and officially notified the company of its intention.

As they made no response, it was assumed that the message was well understood. The silence adds to the conviction that the rankings exercise is suspect at best.

Previous exercises have detected data discrepancies between "what is" and what was reported for rankings purposes.

This is no doubt a weakness that must be urgently rectified, failing which, the best option is to abstain from participation as is the case of USM.

As it turned out there are other weaknesses previously kept hidden. Inside information indicated more serious implications giving tertiary institutions more reasons to stay away from such a dubious exercise.



This is now common knowledge after details have been published in local English dailies in the past weeks.

For some of us this is nothing new because rankings exercises have never been an intellectually honest activity, let alone an exact statistical science.

Their acceptance is predicated on the simplicity of stacking up one (institution) against the other in a so-called flat world.

Not much thought has been given to their construction as recently exposed by the former partner of the Times Higher Education Supplement (THES)-QS World University Rankings.

I heard of this confession first-hand at the British Council-sponsored event Going Global 4 at Westminster in London in a session entitled Flawed Ranking or Key Benchmarking?

It was noted in my column on April 11. Given all the downsides, it is clear that the rankings cannot be regarded as "key benchmarking".

The recent 2010 QS Asian University Rankings is yet another attempt to corner the market.

One politician has been singled out for using "rankings to pass judgement on the state of Malaysian higher education" and "must be told that the annual tables had some serious flaws", according to a THES-QS rankings editor (Learning Curve, May 16).

Unlike Asians, Europeans are more critical of things, rankings included.

Many of them have taken the sponsors of league tables to task, and many too have withdrawn from being subjected to rankings without consultation or consent.

Although others considered it a waste of time, Asians may find it difficult to detach themselves from ranking exercises.

While others wonder if the rankings exercise is important to us, I question its relevance, regardless of who does it.

Indeed in Going Global 4 meeting, I was privileged to present a paper on "Is Internationalisation a Western Construct?".

Extending this question to the rankings issue, I would argue it is another "Western construct" knowingly imposed on us in the most biased way.

Not only is it culturally insensitive, it is also ideological and Western- (some say, Anglo-Saxon-) centric.

This at once makes it political, if not hegemonic, and least of all academic. This, of course, sits well with the world view that education is a business where the market place thrives on competition regardless of the unlevel playing field.

To quote Martin Jacques in *When China Rules the World*: "The West is habituated to the idea that the world is its world, the international community its community, the international institutions its institutions... "

* The writer is the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Sains Malaysia. He can be contacted at vc@usm.my

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