

When all rankings do is rankle

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Comment

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FORMER United Nations secretary-general Kofi Annan remarked recently in Kenya that 95 per cent of new science is created in countries where one-fifth of the world's population lives. This being the case what is the real meaning of world ranking of universities?

Perhaps that is why so many global goals and agendas do not go beyond lip service.

These range from global warming and climate change (the Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012) to the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the UNESCO-led Education for All! initiative (both of which will end in 2015).

Are these not relevant to universities all over the world? Or are they still very much preoccupied with their position in some commercially-driven rankings devised merely to generate discussion as one did recently? Shouldn't we focus on how to create a better world and reach out to the 60 per cent of the 6.6 billion population who are living on less than a few US dollars a day?

With the current rate of change, it is clear that nothing will improve unless we at the universities, especially in developing countries, change our priorities and mindsets.

Past successes are no guarantee of more enduring future achievements. Universities first need to drastically change for this to happen.

All too often tertiary institutions are conservative because highly qualified people are the last to change, if at all.

It is somewhat of an oxymoron, since if they are highly qualified then they must be "smart" enough to embrace and welcome change.



A general view of Cambridge University in the United Kingdom, one of the top ranked tertiary institutions in the world. A preoccupation with rankings diverts our attention from world problems.

Apparently this is not so according to many studies. For many, change is too risky.

As such when a university dares to dream up a new vision of the future, it is clearly a point of departure from the past -- a painful one at that.

And therefore, it is not a frequent occurrence.

There are always forces at work barring changes from happening anyway.

Preoccupation with the ranking hype is one!

There is also the admission of weaknesses in methodologies, changing goal posts, unverified data collection and volatility of measures as eloquently articulated by Dr James Campbell recently in the New Sunday Times.

Yet highly qualified people are easily blinded by these drawbacks as herd mentality takes over!

As soon as someone makes decision, many will rush to it. It does not matter if there is a lack of the normal academic consultative decorum, or it digresses from the more pressing needs of the 21st century.

Instead, naively, universities gear themselves up to meet the set targets, at their own expense, because they desire to be ranked among the so-called "world-class."

Even fewer stop to think and ask: "Which world?" or "Whose world?"

A debate on this alone will expose how short-sighted these measures are because by then the "old" world that we measure ourselves against has moved on. In short, we will create a "world-class" university for a world that is no longer there!

By now we must have realised how irrelevant universities were in the full spectre of the unfolding economic crisis whereby the purported "world-class" ones suffered terrible financial losses. Many of them were quite oblivious to the signs of the economic collapse!

To top it all, many of the culprits responsible for causing the economic crisis are alumni of top-notch universities that we are stacked up against -- some still lead the league tables constructed from flawed systems of yesteryears.

Their education system, like the economic structure it creates and nurtures, is ailing and on the verge of collapse, or is already in, a state of crisis.

The telltale signs have been there all this while, but their conservative academe with a blinkered mentality failed to take notice, or institute a drastic change; at least not until they are forced to by the impending education tsunami.

In 1996, the President of the Club of Rome had warned that education today was still living in the past.

That past is no longer tenable by any measure despite the exercise of "ranking".

That this exercise proliferates is another worrying sign of how it preys on the mindset of the university leadership, which influences decision-makers sold on the one-size-fits-all model of a successful university.

As long as this practice is allowed to go on without criticism, we will live in a captive and apologetic mindset dictated by those who rank the universities.

Eventually we will be too lethargic to think out-of-the-box, and then self-fulfilling prophecies will set in -- strapping us to an outmoded model.

Otherwise, how can we explain the sudden global opinion that militates against the way economic prosperity is being determined now.

Why do experts, including Nobel Laureates, now say that the the Gross Domestic Product is no longer a good indicator of prosperity? Various attempts are being made to debunk it in search of better and more comprehensive alternatives.

In a similar vein, an emerging awareness is now questioning how a highly complex and interdependent planetary ecosystem such as "spaceship Mother Earth" has a minuscule basket of indicators to show the state of our well-being?

A modest jetliner is well equipped with more multiple technologically advanced gadgets to indicate its air worthiness.

Isn't it foolhardy to depend only on a handful of indicators to assess the state of well-being of a nation and community?

Why does it take so long for us to figure this out? The answer is staring us in the face and it is not difficult to find: the old ways of ranking universities are obsolete and do not mean much for the extremely complex and

unsustainable world they created.

For starters, what solutions can the collective "brain power" of the recently ranked top 500 universities in the world offer to effectively beat the deadlines of some of the global agendas such as the MDGs?

If they can't, what is the value of being top ranked -- apart from being an unwarranted distraction for a more serious social engagement!

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