

Disaster of university ranking

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak

Comment

[UTusan Malaysia Online - 10/13/2009](#)

ON Oct 8, 2009, when the results of the THES-QS ranking was announced, I was in Giessen, about an hour from Frankfurt, to fulfil an invitation by the European University Association (EUA), the main umbrella of all universities in the continent.

The invitation was in conjunction with a conference, entitled "Internationalisation beyond European frontiers" and I was asked to present my views, from the perspective outside Europe, as one of the two main speakers. The other was the Rector of Berlin Free University, one of the oldest and renown university in Germany, in fact, Europe too.

At the moment, e-mails came non-stop confirming the "disaster" which hit Malaysia. If Indonesia is because of the earthquakes, the Philippines with its floods and land erosion, Samoa the tsunami and Japan, its flood, in Malaysia, it is the rankings of its public institutions of higher learning (IPTA).

Although only a few IPTA are affected, the implication is disturbing.

The media has a frantic time covering the matter. Strange is, only those listed are questioned, while others which are not in the list (including private institutions of higher learning - IPTS - which is advertised in the media as being global) seem to be safe from the disaster, giving the impression that that it is better not to be listed at all.

This alone is confusing enough as to what exactly is expected, let alone by the organiser of THES-QS when it adamantly claimed that the rankings are accurate, free and reliable. Although there are evidence which proves otherwise, we just nod our heads.

As a comparison, the situation in Giessen during the conference was peaceful, despite hundreds of university rectors in Europe, as well as other continents, together with senior university officers and students jostled in the seminar hall of the Justus Liebig Universitat Giessen, an IPTA which is more than 400 years old.

Giessen is a university town with almost 40 per cent of its population, are students and staff of the university. The universities there are modern and have their own excellent centres, carried out under the German Excellent Initiative, which is emulated by Malaysia under the APEX initiative.

The rankings, especially by a commercial organisation, is totally ignored. They are also not apologetic - in fact, if there is any lesson to be learned from the ranking activities, it is regarded as not suitable to be used as the bench mark for education institutions.

On the other hand, a university has its own personality, vision and uniqueness - in tandem with the understanding of education (not only lessons and researches).

Diversity is wealth, and the more unique is the composition of its diversity, the better it will be for the university. It is not a factory which produces a uniform lifeless being. It is not like a beauty contest, which ranks its winners based on the main formula 36-24-36 as the ideal one. Is it apt that two people are being compared based on their looks alone human beings and not for their humanity.

Likewise, the institution known as a university - more so, when the measurement used is likened to a factory product or for a beauty contest. The fact is, the basis, views and trust of a genuine university are not the same with that of a non-educational institution. But, this is often mixed up to an extent that it completely erased the meaning if a university, as well as makes the situation more confused.

The amazing part is that the university rectors who attended the conference are clear of their responsibilities in ensuring the growth of their universities. Autonomy is repeatedly mentioned to differentiate a university with other organisations, especially those which are commercial in nature and set up for profit-making.

Autonomy to them is the main barrier which has to be retained in bringing up and upholding the dignity of an institution of higher learning. Here, they don't compromise at all and refused to be made a "puppet", to be paraded or taken upstream and downstream.

I assume the conference would be boisterous with debates on the ranking, when looked at from an international perspective. I guess the THES-QS decision is made the absolute benchmark, and also stirred a "disaster" in Giessen, like what happened at home.

Obviously, I was wrong, For the next two days, the issue on ranking was never mentioned, whether by the speakers or the participants. When attempts were made to get their views, the feedback was lukewarm, like "what about it?"

And when told that the THES-QS decision had been announced, they look very cynical, like saying "Who are they to make our university like a "puppet". Generally, people are not bothered at all with the issue because the figures on rankings, to them, mean little, if the concept on ranking is accepted. In fact, someone did ask, "Can I fairly rank my five children, what more to compare them with other children".

The reality, in ranking, we have to follow pre-set orders. For example, a beauty queen, she has to have good grooming and dressed well, even in a bikini, to walk well and smile to win the heart of the judges.

Otherwise, it is difficult to win. What more, in such a contest, the participant from a host country will often be some kind of a winner, although not the first place. This is also becoming common in ranking activities where elements of sponsorship and promotions (some called them "bribery") are beginning to spread.

Hence, there was a time when universities are recommended to advertise their names and logo in the websites of sponsors, with a certain fee, so that they are more "customer-friendly" and "be more visible". Unfortunately, there are some who are lured by this, like a participant of a beauty queen going to bed with a judge of the pageant with the hope of winning the contest.

A lot more can be questioned pertaining to the aspects of ethics and perfection, hence opening up the flaws in efforts to introduce the ranking.

In Greissen I breathed a sigh of relief. More than that, I am more confident that universities do have and make their own evaluation of their responsibilities and role without interference from other quarters.

This article is translated from the original in Bahasa Malaysia (Utusan October 13), courtesy of Utusan Malaysia.

It has been slightly edited for typographical errors and clarity.

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

[Terms & Conditions](#)