



POLICY POLITICS & PEOPLE

By Dr. R. Balasubramaniam

Measuring Higher Education

A few weeks ago, a friend called to enquire about a US University to which his son had secured admission. He was concerned as this particular University did not figure in the top 100 Universities on the QS rankings. He was worried whether spending so much money on his son's higher education was worth it and what exactly the significance of the QS rankings was?

While one can understand his concern about his son's future and the quality of higher education that he should receive, do these rankings truly measure how good a University is? What are the elements of the ranking system and who decides on the metrics? Should one even bother about measuring and ranking them in the first place.

To appreciate all this, one must accept the reality of today's situation where everyone is obsessed with measurements. Each one of us wants to constantly measure everything around us. Whether it is our own personal wealth, or our academic performance or a movie that we want to see or just saw, a meal at the local restaurant or the service that we received in a recent flight that we took; we want to constantly measure and rate. It is now become such an integral part of our lives that we do not pause to ask why are we measuring and what are the metrics that we are using.

Living in a world where education and employment are intricately linked, one needs to pay attention to the quality of education that one is likely to receive in centres of higher learning. Agencies like the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) have detailed analytical processes based on data that they collect and collate from participating Universities worldwide. We need to keep in mind that most of the ranking systems including QS have surveys that Universities need to fill.

Apart from a lengthy application process, there is also a hefty fee that Universities have to pay to be ranked. Though one can be reasonably assured about

the quality and authenticity of the data provided, rarely are their due diligence mechanisms to verify them.

The QS ranking collects information in four major segments — Academic, Employment, Student related and International indicators. Indicators like the academic reputation of an Institution, the H-Index (measures both the productivity and impact of the published work) of researchers, the Citation index of the research work of the faculty, the total staff with Ph.Ds etc. The rankings also gives an overview of the kind of places that graduating students get jobs in, kind of employers participating in campus interviews, Graduate employment rate and the success of Alumni Institutions.

Student rankings relate mostly to the Faculty-Student ratio and the number of International students studying in the University. The proportion of faculty members and students that are international also are captured in the ranking process.

Experience over the last several decades has shown that these rankings are reasonably close with respect to the information that is captured. But one needs to bear in mind that the metrics have been constructed with the bias of the rich Global North and excludes several good Institutions from the Global South. The cost of participating is also a deterrent to several good but smaller Universities in Asia, Africa and South America.

Many of the Universities in these continents are teaching Universities with little or minimal research happening and this lowers the rankings when research outputs are measured. The tendency of equating brick and mortar Infrastructure with good quality is another problem that needs to be kept in mind. Some ranking systems even consider whether the Universities have cycle tracks for students and the carbon footprint that the University is leaving behind.

Traditionally, Indian Universities have also not paid much attention to engaging alumni and setting up active and strong Alumni Institutions. Most public Universities

in countries like India have a perennial resource crunch and several faculty positions tend to be vacant.

Apart from this, the admission to these Universities are rarely driven by the quality of the Professors or the Departments concerned except in well-known older IITs and IIMs. Though several private Universities in India are now delivering high quality education, their participation in these ranking process is still few and far between.

What parents and students also need to consider is that the rankings may not always tell us the complete reality. While a higher ranking may be a good indicator about how good the University is, a low or absent ranking need not necessarily mean that the University is not something to be considered. Enquiries with existing students, collecting information from student blogs, talking to alumni about employment opportunities, potential internship opportunities and exchange programmes available and verifying the availability of good teaching faculty will provide good inputs for decision-making.

Finally, one needs to bear in mind the changing contours of higher education itself. What existing rankings including that of QS provide are based on an analysis of historical data. None of the existing ones are designed to capture how Universities will look like in the future, especially in a post-COVID world.

Keeping the changing nature of what a job in the future will look like, our youth will be better served if they keep in mind their ability to adapt to personalised learning eco-systems and explore Institutions that are exploring innovative ways of ensuring such learning.

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