



Fresh Faces Young Voices

What's your status?

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Universities and honest expectations

Ultimately, a ranking number is merely a guide, not an absolute, when choosing a place to study.

GIVEN a choice to study electronic and electrical engineering in the University of Malaya (UM), Cornell University and the University of New South Wales (UNSW Australia), which would you choose?

Cornell, being an Ivy League university, seems the obvious choice. However, if UM was your pick, you would have chosen the highest ranked university of those presented.

According to the QS World University Rankings: By Subject 2016, UM's electrical and electronic engineering is ranked 37th in the world (79.6 points) while Cornell is at 39th (79.3 points) and UNSW at 43rd (78.6 points).

In fact, UM's development studies subject is 30th in the world while Universiti Sains Malaysia's chemical engineering is 46th.

Similarly, if you were to choose between going to Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), George Washington University or the University of Ottawa, choosing our Malaysian university would mean going to the higher ranked institution.

UPM is currently 270th in the world, having leaped 61 spots from the previous year.

Now, you might be scoffing and saying "270 is nothing!"

You have a valid point – 270 isn't as sexy as a top 50 spot, what more compared to our neighbour's National University of Singapore (12) and Nanyang Technological University (13). Nevertheless, considering that there are approximately 30,000 universities all over the world, 270th isn't too shabby (within the top 1%, in fact).

UM, on the other hand, has improved for a third consecutive year in the QS WUR and is ranked 133 (the immediate next Southeast Asian university after the Singaporean institutions). This puts UM ahead of universities such as Cardiff (144), Newcastle (168), and the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (252).

What this highlights is that our universities are improving.

More often than not we are very hard on ourselves, falling prey to the perception that our higher education system is all doom and gloom. Of course, I'd be the first to say that our universities or education system aren't the finished article.

The quality of graduates we produce, research integrity, quality of lecturers, graduates' communication skills, industry relations, etc, are all issues and challenges that we need to tackle. The growing gap between the top performers and those who fall out of the system is also something to be looked into.

Nevertheless, I believe that it's important for Malaysians to acknowledge these achievements. They are the results of hard work put in by our lecturers, researchers and members of the higher education community, and we should be proud of them.

The journey towards world-class status is one that takes time, and it's a journey we began as a nation and higher education system long ago. We are not starting from scratch.

For instance, in 2007 the Malaysian Government introduced the Research Universities (RU) project, anointing five public universities to focus on the enculturation of research and innovation (similar RU initiatives were embarked upon by institutions in countries such as South Korea, Singapore and Thailand between 1971 and 1999).

Today, nearly a decade later, we are "reaping" the rewards as these five institutions are

leading our nation's charge in not just rankings, but innovation, publications, research, development and the commercialisation of ideas.

For instance, in 2012 Malaysia overtook Singapore and Thailand in terms of academic publications produced and has seen a 594% increase in research output (according to Thomson Reuters).

This quantity is backed by quality when, between 2014 and 2015, seven public university researchers from the RUs were recognised by Thomson Reuters as "The World's Most Influential Scientific Minds".

Between 2007 and 2015, the RUs have generated some RM7.1bil for the nation, representing a 28.5% Rate of Research Investment (RoRI) to the nation.

Public and private institutions beyond the RUs have also played an important role in our nation's higher education progress. Twenty-seven subjects across 11 public and private universities, including Universiti Teknologi Petronas and Multimedia University, are top 300 in the world, with our institutions excelling particularly in engineering fields.

My alma mater, the International Islamic University of Malaysia, is one of the world's top publishers of Islamic banking and finance papers according to research database organisation Elsevier, while Universiti Utara Malaysia has carved a niche for itself in business studies and recently gained the prestigious AACSB accreditation (the longest serving global accrediting body for business schools).

Admittedly, university rankings are a controversial matter and there are many opinions about them. There are many rankings out there purporting to be the best, most reflective, transparent, et cetera.

And it comes to a point where it's hard to really distinguish. Some lament that ranking bodies are profit driven, tainting their noble motivations.

Rankings are unable to capture the more salient points about a university – the quality of teaching, the student experience and the cultural exposure.

Hence, between UM and Cornell, I wouldn't blame Malaysians for choosing the latter. I probably would too.

The allure of studying abroad, the presence of a unique academic community, and living in a foreign land is hard to turn down.

Suffice to say, one should look at rankings with a pinch of salt.

At the same time, it is undeniable that rankings "excite" the public, for better or for worse, and international students who want to study abroad will refer to them in order to make an informed choice.

At this stage, I would say rankings are important as a benchmark and reflection point for us, but should never be the be-all and end-all.

I believe that as long as society is aware of where we are, is proud of what we have achieved, and confident about overcoming our shortcomings, Malaysia's higher education system will continue to improve for the benefit of the nation and her people.

> Fresh Faces Young Voices offers a new space to a new generation that's passionate about their causes. Danial Rahman has education close to his heart and welcomes feedback at danielrahman0330@gmail.com.