

# Rankings, Reform and Reflection

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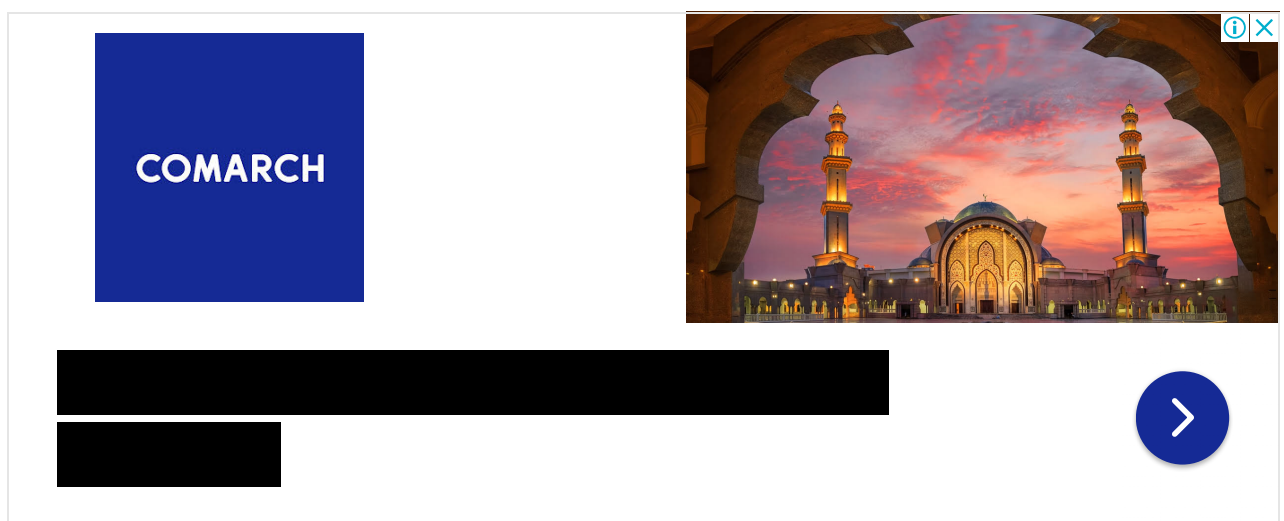
## INTRODUCTION

While scrolling through Twitter recently, news popped up that the Dean of Harvard Medical School (HMS), Professor George Daley, decided to withdraw HMS from the U.S. News and World Report Ranking (UNSWR). Earlier, Yale Law School also left UNSWR.

The bold decision sent shockwaves across the academic world as participation in university rankings have become 'sacrosanct' in recent times. Perhaps this is the watershed moment that would catalyse change the direction of higher education globally?

Prof. Daley arrived at the decision after careful "consideration and consultation with colleagues and stakeholder". He said that the decision rested on the "principled belief that ranking cannot meaningfully reflect the high aspirations of educational excellence, graduate preparedness, and compassionate and equitable patient care that we strive to foster in our medical education programmes".

He emphasised the unintended consequences that "ranking creates perverse incentives for institutions to report misleading or inaccurate data, set policies to boost rankings rather than nobler objectives, or divert financial aid from students with financial need to high-scoring students with means in order to maximise ranking criteria".



His statement resonated with me. I concur in the belief that rankings have created an unhealthy trend and obsession, thus creating unnecessary pressure on university management to 'play' its unfortunate game.

## **LIFE BEFORE RANKINGS**

Having been in academia for over 30 years, I have witnessed how the university ranking system has somehow disrupted the landscape and priority of higher education.

The purpose of university ranking was to provide a comparative evaluation of universities based on various metrics such as research output, academic reputation, student satisfaction, and the employability of graduates. However, the overemphasis on ranking has limited diversity and innovation as universities prioritise factors that are emphasised in the ranking instead of focusing on educational experience and contribution to the nation.

During my early years in academia, there were no institutional rankings such as Times Higher Education (THE) and Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), which were introduced only in 2004 and probably came to our shore a few years later.

Our focus was on student development and conducting research to solve industry and societal challenges. We were not beholden to those rankings and ratings. Instead, we presented and took pride in our research outcomes at reputable discipline-related academic conferences and journals.

Rubbing shoulders and learning from the gurus was joyful for a young academician like me. Today, many put Scopus-indexed conferences as their main priority irrespective of their quality.

For publications, our best guide was a list by Association of Business Schools (ABS). Getting accepted by those journals and seeing our papers cited by other prominent scholars was considered a great achievement. Often, it was the culmination of countless hours, days, and nights of reading, researching, drafting, writing and re-writing.

In addition, we endeavoured to write industry-friendly articles and participate in industry events. Their feedback not only gave us a sense of fulfilment but also ensured the relevance of our academic works. It also aided us in expanding our industry networking.

We would share our research and industry-engagement outcomes with our students, enriching the classroom discussion and completing this true and virtuous academic cycle.

## **WHERE THINGS GO WRONG**

Producing quality research and publications takes time. Therefore, I am “amazed” that some academicians today can publish 20 to 30 academic papers a year. How is this possible? How rigorous are the reviews? What research are the papers based on? Will the pursuit of quantity jeopardise the quality and research benefits to industry and society?

Back then, paying for a paper to be published was unheard of. Publication editors would accept papers based on research originality and quality. Today, paying for journal publications is almost expected, and universities need to allocate funds for that purpose. Does this not create a conflict of interest?

Today, instead of attending academic discourses to address and debate real issues, many academicians prefer going to workshops on “new and sophisticated” data analysis methods that focus on maximising journal publication and impact ranking outcomes. Is this really beneficial?

Let me be clear: I am not against publications or enhancing research skills. But when was the last time we took a step back and deeply reflected on the trajectory? Let us not forget that this has consequences for our children, society, and country.

## **REALIGNING MALAYSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION**

At an event in University Malaya and during the New Year’s Speech recently, the Higher Education Minister, YB Datuk Seri Khaled Nordin, called out the obsessive nature our universities have towards rankings.

He said that measuring the impact of research-based almost purely on journal publications is no longer relevant. Rather, he stressed innovation and solutions-based research and called on academicians to focus on areas that are critical and strategic for the nation.

I believe that to be an innovation-driven nation by 2030, it is important for Malaysia to focus on both fundamental research that addresses complex and futuristic issues, and action research that provides solutions to immediate problems. They are complementary, and this approach leads to scalability and sustainability.

In fact, outcomes from fundamental research may also produce spin-off companies, while action research may produce many start-up companies while creating job opportunities for people.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), one of the world’s best, built its reputation for serious innovation by translating basic science into concepts and technologies to serve society, according to MIT President Rafael Reif. Similarly, Nitin Nohria, the former dean of Harvard Business School, once said, Nothing that we do is not relevant. The keywords are relevant and collaboration.

Malaysia’s twenty (20) public universities are classified into research, technical, focused, and comprehensive universities. They must revisit their original mandates of establishment and excel in these areas. For example, entrepreneurship at Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK), agriculture at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), management at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), and education at Universiti Perguruan Sultan Idris (UPSI).

Instead of competing, they need to collaborate and complement each other. Let us also not forget the many private universities where there are abundant collaboration opportunities in areas of sustainability (Sunway University), hospitality (Taylor’s), and engineering (Heriot-Watt). We are, after all, stronger together.

## **THE FUTURE – COLLABORATION**

While the ranking of our public and private universities have grown steadily over the past decade, their

effectiveness in championing the mandates of their establishments are yet to be proven.

What is also important is inter-university partnership and university-industry collaboration in achieving a bigger goal for the nation, to become a fully developed nation backed by science and technology-based innovation by 2030.

To conclude, we want our lecturers and researchers to be imaginative and innovative while being referred to and respected by the industries. Research results must benefit the society while at the same time be far sighted – or as President Faust of Harvard University once shared that research must “...foster restless scepticism and unbounded intellectual curiosity yet innovative enough to imagine a world different from the one in which we live now”.

Hence, we must move away from an obsession with academic publications per se, but focus on a balance between quality research and practical applications. Similarly, rankings and ratings are important but they are by-products of the overall high quality education including research and publications.

When high-quality education is in place, good ranking and ratings will come naturally.

