

Varsity rankings - they don't tell all

Linda Lim for The Straits Times 17 December 2004

THE Times of London's recent worldwide ranking of universities seems to have created quite a buzz in Singapore with the placement of the National University of Singapore (NUS) at No. 18, a position that justifies some degree of national as well as institutional pride.

But it caused not a ripple in the United States, even in academic circles. Most academicians pay scant attention to rankings produced by commercial newspapers and magazines, for good reason.

Especially on the higher end, universities are not in the business of producing standardised products that can be ranked according to some measurable objective scale.

For good or ill, most universities pride themselves on differentiation, not standardisation.

Diversity in academia is considered a good in itself, providing consumers with more varied choices and encouraging innovation in the creation and dissemination of new knowledge.

There are many methodological grounds on which to question university rankings, besides the fact that they mostly compare apples and oranges.

The outcome of any ranking process depends entirely on what variables the rankers choose to include, how they measure them, and what weight they assign to each factor in the ranking, all of which are subjective.

Competition between rankers virtually forces them to differentiate their rankings.

Even in the best-known rankings of a relatively (though still incompletely) standardised academic product - full-time United States MBA programmes - BusinessWeek, US News & World Report and The Wall Street Journal all rank the same programmes differently.

At least one scholarly study of the BusinessWeek rankings found it to be statistically invalid - the differentiation it produced among the top 20 programmes could be explained entirely by what statisticians call 'noise' (random variation).

MBA programme rankings at least have the virtue of comparing apples with apples - the same programme at different institutions.

It is much more difficult to compare heterogeneous comprehensive universities with each other, especially without differentiating among disciplines and degree programmes.

For example, Harvard may indeed be the best university in the world.

But that does not mean it has the best undergraduate business degree programme (it has none), or that you would go there to study engineering (Illinois and many others are much better), or South-east Asia (Michigan, Cornell and Wisconsin have richer curricula).

Besides their dubious methodological validity, university rankings are of questionable utility to the consumer. Most rankings are based on measurement of inputs, not outputs. Inputs include such items as the grade-point average or the American Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) score of the average entering undergraduate, the amount of money spent per student, the student-faculty ratio, and so on.

These do not tell us the value-added of a university education at a particular institution - that is, the difference it makes to the lifetime welfare (both in income and non-pecuniary terms) of the individual student.

That a smart graduate will do well on the job market is no surprise, but how much of the credit should go to his particular university versus any other that he might have attended instead?

There are, of course, many reasons to go to university, of which learning a particular set of job skills (that might also be acquired through other means) is only one.

Other reasons include knowledge or status acquisition for their own sake (as consumption goods), credentialing and job placement services, access to compatible social networks (including potential life or business partners), or simply the overall experience of a university education.

When you put all these factors together, and tailor them to a particular individual with specific capabilities, interests, ambitions, maturation needs, likes and dislikes (for example, for a big city versus a small town location) and financial constraints, it becomes apparent that university rankings are not that helpful.

I doubt that The Times' higher-than-expected ranking of NUS will make much difference to the number of Singaporeans who choose to attend university abroad, since I have rarely heard any of them say they do so because NUS or the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) are not good enough.

The NUS and NTU graduates I have taught in my university's MBA programme are also no different in their classroom performance and job market placement than Singaporean classmates with bachelor's degrees from foreign universities such as the London School of Economics.

Rather, Singaporean students I have known who choose to study abroad overwhelmingly do so for the overseas experience, which by definition cannot be replicated at home.

It includes developing a higher level of personal independence and life skills, seizing the opportunity to travel and see the world, learn other cultures, get to know people of diverse nationalities, develop a global network, become exposed to different intellectual perspectives, get out of one's comfort zone, compete in a bigger pond, and benchmark one's individual competitiveness against the world.

If Singaporean undergraduates say they go abroad to study because it is better rather than just different, they are usually referring to a particular specialist subject-area strength of the foreign university they chose, or to a perceived difference in pedagogy and teaching philosophy especially in the US.

This includes more questioning and challenging of ideas, more intellectual risk-taking and more interactive discussion in the classroom, with more diverse perspectives, than they (rightly or wrongly) imagine exists in Singapore institutions.

Singaporeans studying overseas also yield benefits to the nation as a whole from the more diverse educational background and broader global networks of its citizens, and from the vacation of local university spaces for others.

That some Singaporeans study overseas because they cannot get into the local universities also expands the cohort of citizens who can benefit from university education, helping to maximise individuals' educational attainment and the national supply of skills.

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