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## Universities: telling the good from the bad

Grading universities is not an easy task. As in a beauty contest, opinions and tastes count.

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Grading universities is not an easy task. As in a beauty contest, opinions and tastes count. But the task is important because universities, which seek students and funds, are nowadays aggressively advertising themselves. One hears some rather astonishing, even bizarre, claims. Ranger-guarded Karachi University — which resembles more a detention camp than a university — allegedly belongs to the world's top 200 universities. Whoever believes this must also believe in tooth fairies.

There are even stranger beliefs. Last April, the Quaid-i-Azam University administration proudly announced that the QS World University Ranking Body had placed QAU as 69th among the world's top 100 universities. QS had lauded QAU's publications in "mechanical, aeronautical and manufacturing engineering". But QAU's chest-thumping in the public media abruptly ended aftersomeone pointed out that QAU did not have any engineering departments. After QS admitted to a typographical mistake, QAU responded that it deserved to be highly rated anyway!

Of course, fighting for university rankings happens across the world. It costs little to make one's own criteria and then claim excellence. For example, the University of Jammu in Kashmir and Universiti Teknologi Mara in Malaysia, stake their claim to fame on the basis of certification from the International Standards Organization (ISO) — a dubious proposition because ISO merely looks at the adequacy of procedural and management processes. Reflecting the intrinsic subjectivity, the widely-quoted top-500 list of the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (UK) is somewhat different from that of Shanghai Jiao Tong University.

The lack of strict objectivity means unhealthy practices are possible. In Pakistan, the Higher Education Commission chose to define academic excellence as primarily determined by the number of research papers (rather than their impact upon a field) produced by a university. The consequences have been horrendous.

Pakistan's university teachers and researchers have roughly the same ethical standards as its politicians, generals, judges, and shopkeepers. Hiding in the shadows is even easier because it is hard for non-academics to tell the difference between trivial and significant works. So once the PCST and HEC announced cash awards and other perks, almost overnight a research-poor country started producing a bumper crop of "research articles" year after year. The HEC claimed victory but many papers were tired repetitions, contained fake data, were plagiarised, or published in fly-by-night journals. Dr Isa Daudpota, an intrepid academic trouble-shooter has, over the years, documented the academic sleaze. Such stark evidence has, unfortunately, had scant effect upon the HEC.

While a healthy scepticism of university ratings is perfectly justified, telling good universities from bad ones is certainly not a hopeless task — at least at a basic level.

Here is how it could be done in principle: take students studying similar subjects at University X and University Y. Have them write the same essay, or solve the same textbook problems in science or math. Better still, they could be required to take credible (national or international) examinations. Let neutral referees then compare the results, and also judge which set of students can articulate their thoughts better. Repeat this procedure with teachers at X and Y. Since a university is made of students and teachers, this allows for a straightforward academic comparison of X with Y.

Without such basic competencies, it is all pointless. Sadly, there are quite a few Pakistani universities where competencies are in short supply. Surely there is little to be gained from a department of English where the department's head cannot speak or write a grammatically correct non-trivial sentence of English; a physics department where the head is confused about the operation of an incandescent light bulb; a mathematics department where graduate students have problems with elementary

surds and roots; or a biology department where evolution is thought to be new-fangled and quite unnecessary to teach as part of modern biology. A thousand 'internationally published' papers, or putting lighted signboards of an alleged "centre of excellence" makes not the slightest bit of difference.

Many universities — those that have crossed the stage of basic competencies — will want to walk the catwalk. What guidelines should be given to the judges of this veritable beauty contest? Towards this end, with the hope of creating a yardstick, let us imagine something that doesn't exist anywhere — a hypothetical 'ideal university'. This university should be the absolute best that you can imagine. Here is what it should look like.

First, the ideal university should be a bastion of critical inquiry covering every conceivable field of human endeavour. It has first-rate faculty that does first-rate research on super-massive black holes and discovers new extra-solar planets, figures out quantum computation and the folding of proteins, documents the mating habits of macaws and tarantulas, and deciphers the extinct languages of Sumeria and Mesopotamia. The professors are widely cited and known for important discoveries. Their fame attracts talented researchers and students from across the world. Academic and cultural freedom is crucial. Unless authority and conventional wisdom can be challenged, one cannot have meaningful research and teaching of history, art, politics, and the social sciences. This freedom is important for the entire university culture.

Our ideal university also spawns high-tech companies that create more powerful computers and data compression techniques. It generates products and ideas upon which the progress and survival of civilisations depends, such as new crop varieties and renewable energy sources. It also does a splendid job at training engineers, doctors, economists, business managers, and other professionals.

Most importantly — this ideal university creates a modern citizenry capable of responsible and reasoned decision making. Its graduates can think independently and scientifically, have an understanding of history and culture, can create discourses on social and political issues, and are capable of coherent expression in speech and writing. They are in demand everywhere — both in academia and industry — nationally and internationally.

A tall order indeed! Even Harvard, MIT, Cambridge, Oxford and Sorbonne are poor approximations. But a university does not have to be of the highest order in order to be useful. Having a forward-looking worldview, a spirit of inquiry, an open environment, good ethical standards, a sense of collegiality, a shared sense of purpose, and good governance practices is plenty for a good starting point. That a handful of Pakistani universities, public and private, seem earnest about getting on to this track is heartening. The challenge is to get the reluctant majority on board.

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