

Head: What do university rankings represent?

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Not everyone supported university rankings when they started to attract interest in the 1980s, but today ranking is embedded in higher education globally. Ranking allows us to move beyond the stereotypical Chinese doctrine for higher education that being old means being good. It removes self-assumption from the calculation, and instead moves us toward objective assessment.

Among several systems for ranking universities, Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), Times Higher Education (THE) and Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) are the most influential. Each uses different criteria and so produces different results.

The table below reveals that Japan, mainland China and Singapore are the three best countries in Asia in terms of their university rankings. They are ranked among the top 100 in all three systems. Any university that notches up such a performance can be considered excellent.

In comparison, higher education in Hong Kong and South Korea has made some progress and is approaching excellence. We would come to the same conclusion even if standards were loosened, and not confined to the top 100 standard.

Five years ago, only two universities from Asia (both in Japan) were ranked among the top 100 in all three rankings. According to the latest results of these three rankings, that number has risen to five: Peking University, Tsinghua University, National University of Singapore, and Tokyo and Kyoto universities.

I contend that the key lies in “soulware”, i.e. the basic principles of “integration of teaching and research” and “separation of politics and academics”. In general, “soulware” is badly needed in our community.

Evaluation reveals patterns of success. Five years ago, 29 of the 53 universities ranked among the top 100 in the world in all three rankings were American. Today, of the 58 universities ranked among the top 100 in all three rankings, 32 are in the US.

Perceptions about universities can be misleading. The green hills still stand as before, along with a perpetually rosy sunset, i.e. the hills and sunset won't change simply because of perception. Unless Hong Kong rewards strongly performing universities and invests in learning and research at international standards, I predict that, after falling behind Singapore, we will likely lag behind South Korea.

Ultimately, do some people dismiss international rankings because the results fail to align with expectations and a mindset dating back to colonial times? If a nihilist insists ranking systems have no value, does the dogmatic mind and empty talk of such a person possess any intrinsic worth?

Number of universities in the US and major Asian countries/regions among university rankings

Rankings Countries and regions	QS 2019*	THE 2018*	ARWU 2017*	58 (53) simultaneously in QS, THE, ARWU
US	33 (30)	43 (47)	48 (53)	32 (29)
Japan	5 (6)	2 (2)	3 (4)	2 (2)
Mainland China	6 (3)	2 (2)	2 (0)	2 (0)
Singapore	2 (2)	2 (2)	1 (0)	1 (0)
South Korea	5 (2)	2 (3)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Hong Kong	4 (3)	3 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Taiwan	1 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)

* These are the latest available results.

(Numbers in the brackets represent the ranking results five years ago.)