

University Rankings – Are Philippine HEIs Ready for Them?

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ABSTRACT

This paper first traces the history of university rankings from the US News and World Report, the earliest, to the Times Higher Education rankings, the latest. It questions the validity of such rankings, citing weaknesses in their methodologies and the fact that data can be manipulated. Nevertheless, the author accedes that university rankings are here to stay. The paper then asks if Philippine higher education institutions are ready to be ranked. It contends that since the criteria used by rankers depend much on big financial resources, Philippine HEIs are already at a disadvantage. In addition, there remain inefficiencies in higher education that cause the deterioration of the quality of higher education, among which are the high number of HEIs, oversubscribed programs that result in an oversupply of graduates in certain disciplines, and the ten-year preparation for college.

Keywords: *university rankings, higher education*

On September 28, 2011, I attended a meeting of the House Committee on Higher and Technical Education which was called to discuss four House resolutions inquiring into the quality of higher education and the standing of Philippine universities in international rankings of world universities. One resolution introduced by Representative Winnie Castelo was to congratulate and commend the University of the Philippines and the Ateneo de Manila University for being among the top 50 best English-teaching universities in the 2011 Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings. Another resolution, sponsored by Representatives Neptali M. Gonzales and Juan Edgardo Angara was an inquiry, in aid of legislation, into the deteriorating quality of higher education in the Philippines, particularly the dismal performance of Philippine universities in international rankings. A third resolution, sponsored by Representatives Neptali M. Gonzales II and Party-list Representative Eulogio Magsaysay called for another inquiry, again in aid of legislation, on the implications of the Philippines' low standing in the 2011 QS Asian University Ranking. Still another resolution sponsored by Representatives Neptali M. Gonzales II, Rufus B. Rodriguez and Maximo B. Rodriguez, Jr, called for an inquiry into the continued operation of low performing colleges and universities all over the Philippines.

Before these resolutions were taken up, the Committee took up House Bill No. 3636 introduced by Representative Bai Sandra A. Sema seeking to convert the Cotabato City State Polytechnic College into the Cotabato State University.

While defending the UP budget before the Senate in 2006, Senate Finance Committee Chair Senator Manuel Villar stressed that UP should not be content

with being the best university in the Philippines – it should benchmark itself internationally. No reference was made to international rankings but that comment was said at about the time the Times Higher Education Supplement (THES) came out with its 2006 ranking of world universities when UP ranked first among Philippine universities.

In April 2006 while attending a higher education conference of presidents, rectors, and vice chancellors of Asia Pacific Rim Universities (APRU) in Singapore the Vice Chancellor of the University of Malaya confided to me that he had been asked by Parliament to explain the sudden decline in the ranking of the University of Malaya(UM) in the THES university ranking, from 89th place in 2004 when the first ranking came out to 169th place in 2005. Immediately after the 2004 THES ranking came out, he said he was challenged by the then Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia to put UM in the top 50 universities in the world. The sudden drop in UM's place in the 2005 ranking, according to the Vice Chancellor put his position in peril. By June 2006, UM had a new vice chancellor.

Since the first publication of the THES ranking in 2004, the international higher education conferences that I have attended would always have the heads of universities, especially in Asia and Europe, formally introducing their universities by citing their universities' rank or place in the latest survey. On the other hand, Presidents of US universities introduce their universities by citing the number of Nobel Prize winners in their alumni and their staff. Private conversations among us, however, centered on questions on the validity of the ranking, the weaknesses of the methodology and the sometimes incredible results. There was much skepticism about the ranking, yet the

heads of universities continued to cite their university ranking in their introductions, and more recently have included this information in their university brochures.

International university rankings have indeed found their way in discussions and debates in academic circles, in university conferences, in parliaments, in the halls of Congress. They are hot topics among alumni and the public. Each time the result of rankings come out, heads of the universities are hard pressed to justify their universities' performance. It is not helping that surveyors have become even more aggressive in advertising the results. They remain persistent about getting universities to participate in the surveys/rankings.

University Rankings – a Background

Ranking universities has had a long history and has been used in many countries even before the THES and the Shanghai Jiao Tong University (SJTU) rankings came out. Considered the “grandfather” of college rankings, the US News and World Report¹ started a quarter of a century ago the idea of ranking colleges in the United States. At that time ranking was based on academic reputation and was more input-based (student selection, etc.). Over the years, the methodology had been revised putting greater emphasis on output (graduates, research performance, etc.)

What the magazine started in the early 80s gave birth to similar national rankings in Canada, in countries in Europe and in Asia. The focus then was ‘in country’ where universities of a country were ranked relative to each other. With the advent of globalization and when the concept of ‘world class university’ became the buzz words in higher education, surveyors went beyond national borders

and began ranking universities of the world.

Asiaweek magazine started its ranking of Asian universities in the 1990s, initially ranking MBA programs in Asia. It later expanded the ranking by going beyond programs and looking at colleges and universities. Among its criteria were: faculty median salary, faculty/student ratio, faculty benefits, number of students with email addresses, etc. Its methodology was criticized as being biased in favor of those universities and colleges that had huge funding and endowments. The University of Tokyo ranked first – the best university in Asia – in the first two runs of the survey but it opted out in the subsequent surveys. The university formally informed *Asiaweek* that it no longer wanted to be part of the survey. This *Asiaweek* respected. Other universities in China, India, Thailand, and New Zealand followed². *Asiaweek's* critics questioned the methodology, saying there was no way one can objectively measure academic excellence especially if one were comparing institutions with different circumstances, locations, etc. In 2000 *Asiaweek* decided to discontinue the survey.

In 2003 the Center for World Class Universities and the Institute of Higher Education of SJTU in China published its first ranking of world universities. Also known as the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), the SJTU ranking considered six (6) objective indicators including the number of alumni and staff who have won Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals (30%), citations and publications (60%) and per capita performance with respect to size of institution³. The indicators clearly show a bias for research so that expectedly one would see financially endowed research universities among those that ranked high in the survey. Universities in developing

countries hardly figured in the ranking. As expected the ARWU was criticized for being too biased for research, with no regard for teaching quality and student learning.

The THES, a joint project of Times Higher Education and Quacquarelli Symonds first came out with its own ranking in 2004, enlarging its indicators to include academic reputation using perceptions of academic peers and employers (50%) as well as teaching quality, by looking at faculty/student ratio (20%), and internationalization—number of international staff and students (10%). Citations per faculty constituted 20% of the indicators. Like other surveys, THES received its fair share of criticisms but for the most part it was criticized for being too commercial.

In 2010 Times Higher Education (THE) decided to split from the partnership. Phil Baty, deputy director of THE⁴ admitted that “academic reputation had serious weaknesses.” He was referring to surveys which included the perceptions of academic peers and employers. That same year, Times Higher Education, in partnership this time with Thomson Reuters, came up with the Times Higher Education World University rankings using thirteen (13) indicators reduced into five categories: teaching (30%), research (30%), citations (30%), industry income (2.5%) and international outlook (7.5%).

The first decade of the 21st century saw many other magazines and universities in other countries in the world sponsoring surveys and rankings of universities. Some surveys highlight research performance, some focus on professional ranking of business schools while others look at scholarly contents, visibility and impact of universities on the web. The increasing interest in ranking universities points to one thing: surveys

and rankings are here to stay, the criticisms notwithstanding.

University Rankings—Of What Use Are They?

Surveyors will always have a reason for doing the survey. If the surveyor were a university the reason may be to benchmark their university relative to others and using the results to attract funding. But for magazines one cannot help but view their motive as a business proposition—a booming business at that.

University rankings have come under fire, mostly from universities and colleges themselves who claim that rankings exert undue influence and yet are inaccurate. The methodologies have inherent weaknesses and data used can be subject to manipulation. Surveyors have responded by revising their methods, analysis, and criteria.

Despite the stinging comments they continue the rankings, claiming these are particularly useful to students who are about to make decisions on which university to go to. Researchers use the ranking to help them identify research partners/collaborators. Academics use them for career decisions, e.g. which universities to transfer to. Heads of universities use them to benchmark performance and to set strategic priorities. Policy and lawmakers use them as basis for national policy.

And so the rankings continue and many more join in and start their own ranking.

Rankings and Philippine Higher Education

Of the now more than 2000 higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Philippines, only four universities figure consistently in the international

rankings—UP, the only state university, and three other private universities—Ateneo de Manila University, De la Salle University and the University of Santo Tomas. Not one of these four have ever landed in the top 100 of the best universities in the world.

In 1979 the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) issued a compensation circular on the use of the State University and Colleges (SUC) Leveling Instrument primarily aimed at determining the classification level of SUC presidents and vice-presidents and their compensation. SUCs were classified into nine (9) levels which considered enrolment size, number of programs, faculty size and profile, resources for research, extension, non-formal training, number of dormitories and residents, and appropriations or the budget. In 1989, the DBM reduced the number of levels to four (4). The revision was made due to the implementation of the Salary Standardization Law. Note that at that time there was as yet no Commission on Higher Education (CHED).

The Leveling Instrument was again revised in 2003 and this time the announcement on the revision was made jointly by DBM and CHED. Four Key Result Areas (KRAs) were prescribed and were assigned points for purposes of leveling: quality and relevance of instruction, research capability and outputs, relations with and services to the community, and management of resources. Since then, SUCs have been evaluated and classified using this instrument. In this instrument, performance of graduates in the Professional Regulatory Commission examinations and the accreditation status of universities by CHED as centers of excellence or centers of development are included under KRA quality and relevance of instruction.

Prior to 2003, there was an attempt on the part of CHED to rank state and private universities but this was resisted by the private HEIs. Instead CHED and DBM came out with the revised leveling instrument, which covers only the SUCs. This is the closest it can get to any form of assessment or ranking of SUCs. On the other hand, private universities worked on having themselves accredited by private associations. Seemingly Philippine HEIs do not mind going through accreditation processes or being classified—they simply do not want to be ranked.

Because CHED is mandated to regulate both public and private HEIs and their operations, it has always been blamed not only for the declining quality of Philippine higher education but also for the lackluster performance of Philippine universities in international rankings.

In the September 2011 hearing at the House of Representatives, the presidents of universities attempted to explain the disappointing performance of Philippine universities in the international rankings. One said the criteria used were too biased for research and that there was no way the Philippines could ever compete given government's spending for research. Another related the problem to the per capita budgets of universities citing 2004 figures⁵ with the UP spending \$1226 per student per year, considered among the lowest among all universities in the Asia Pacific Rim. Japanese universities were spending from \$50,000 to \$60,000. US universities were spending between \$15,000 and \$60,000. Australian National University was spending about \$23,000, the National University of Singapore, \$24,138. Chulalongkorn University and the University of Malaya were spending almost double the UP's budget.

A private university president said private universities had no access to

research funds from government. Another said that surveyors have approached them to participate in the survey for a participation fee of at least P600,000.

Are Philippine HEIs Ready for Rankings?

If one were to examine the criteria used by rankers in ranking universities, one will be convinced of the big role financial resources play in influencing one's performance in the ranking, and its impact on the quality of higher education. Indicators such as research performance, number of citations, faculty/student ratio, or international outlook have a common denominator—all these require financial resources.

Worldwide the trend has been toward reduced government spending for higher education. The Philippines is no exception. Government appropriation for higher education has been going on a downtrend if it is not stabilized at low levels. SUCs are forced to generate income on their own. Funds raised hardly make a dent in improving the quality of instruction and research. But there is another culprit that explains the deteriorating quality of Philippine higher education and consequently, the poor performance of Philippine universities, public or private, in the international rankings game. And this is that there remain inefficiencies in higher education which if uncontrolled will contribute to further deterioration of the quality of higher education.

So what are these inefficiencies?

1. The number of HEIs in the country

The Philippines with a population of almost 93 Million has about 2180 HEIs⁶ catering to about 2.77 million college students (CHED, n.d.) Vietnam's population is about 89

Million, with 1.2 million ready for the university and it has 376 universities⁷. In Vietnam they worry that they may not have enough spaces for their college students in their universities. Japan's population is 127 million with about 2.85 million ready for college. It has about 773 HEIs⁸. Former Department of Education Secretary Edilberto de Jesus said the number of Philippine HEIs is "unnecessarily high"⁹ compared with other countries in Europe and Asia. It does not help also that state colleges now seek to be upgraded, such as the case of the Cotabato City State Polytechnic College, to allow it to offer more courses.

2. Oversubscribed programs leading to oversupply of graduates in certain fields

The latest CHED figures¹⁰ show that of the 2.77 million college students almost eighty percent (80%) are enrolled in only five fields or disciplines (see Table 1).

There is an oversupply of graduates in these fields which has led CHED to issue CHED Memorandum No. 32 ordering a moratorium on the opening of new programs in business administration, nursing, teacher education, hotel and restaurant management and information technology. This is a step in the right direction but it remains to be seen if CHED can strictly regulate enrolment in these disciplines. Education or teacher training, which attracts over

Table 1. Fields with most number of students in 2009-2010 (Source: CHED)

PROGRAM	ENROLLMENT	%
Business administration and related fields	724,215	26.1 %
Medical and allied fields	440,335	15.9 %
Education/Teacher training	352,046	12.7 %
Information Technology	348,462	12.5 %
Engineering and Technology	344,462	12.4 %

Table 2. Percentage of students who passed the professional licensure examinations in 2011 (Source: CHED)

PROFESSIONAL LICENSURE EXAMINATION	DATE	%
Licensure Examination for Teachers - Elementary	April 2011	15.81 %
Licensure Examination for Teachers - ATEP	April 2011	10.32 %
Licensure Examination for Teachers - Secondary	April 2011	26.28 %
Licensure Examination for Teachers - Elementary	September 2011	19.58 %
Licensure Examination for Teachers - ATEP	September 2011	7.21 %
Licensure Examination for Teachers - Secondary	September 2011	25.86 %
Certified Public Accountant	October 2011	47.47 %
Mechanical Engineering	October 2011	67.00 %
Chemical Engineering	October 2011	52.50 %
Naval/Marine Engineering	October 2011	46.00 %
Electrical Engineering	October 2011	58.00 %
Geodetic Engineering	October 2011	34.00 %
Civil Engineering	May 2011	38.00 %
Nursing	July 2011	48.00 %

350,000 students is not even considered a priority discipline yet it continues to attract students. Compare this with enrolment figures in mathematics and the natural sciences (both priority fields), which for AY 2010-2011 totaled only 36,281.

To make things worse, graduates of these top five fields do not do very well in the professional licensure examinations. Table 2 shows the percentage passing of examinees in the different fields in 2011¹¹ reflecting a very disappointing, if not dismal performance:

3. Graduates' performance in licensure examinations

The good news is that CHED has started to close down schools that

have consistently been performing poorly in the licensure examinations. In 2011 CHED Chairperson Patricia B. Licuanan has announced the closure of some programs of the Philippine Maritime Institute. It has also publicly discouraged students from taking up nursing.

This very inefficient situation where you have an oversupply of graduates who cannot practice their professions because they are unable to comply with standards has put Philippine higher education in such a sorry state.

4. High schools in state universities and colleges

Not all of the higher education budget of the SUCs is spent for higher education. A portion of the HE budget goes to supporting basic education. Yet HEIs cannot collect tuition from elementary and high school students in view of the law on free basic education. SUCs offering bachelor's degrees in elementary and secondary education have been allowed to operate laboratory elementary and high schools and until the year 2000, in some SUCs, enrollment in basic education was larger than collegiate enrollment. CHED has since then ruled that a laboratory school should not exceed 500 in enrollment. There are a number of state universities who violate this rule although they justify the situation by saying the reduction in enrollment can only be done gradually. One campus in UP (before it became autonomous) has violated the CHED rule twice over. First it has exceeded the enrollment quota and second, it does not even offer bachelor's degrees in elementary and secondary education. A good 25% of its faculty resources and budget is spent for the high school. This means

taking away 25% of the resources for higher education.

5. The ten-year preparation for college

Everywhere else in the world except the Philippines and one or two more countries¹², the educational system requires twelve years of basic education preparatory to college. The Philippines at present has a ten-year preparation- for-college system. What are the implications of having this system?

First, because Philippine basic education is two years short of the universal standard, high school graduates go to universities with inadequate preparation. Colleges and universities have had to assume the burden of giving remedial courses to incoming freshman students. Thus the first semester, if not the first year of college work, seeks mainly to remedy the inadequate preparation of high school students. Here is another example of higher education subsidizing basic education. In some cases, after the first year, students drop out of college – again a clear case of resources going to waste.

Second, more and more countries now require twelve years preparatory college work before they accept Philippine graduates for employment or for graduate studies. The Washington Accord prescribes a 12-year pre-college preparation for engineering graduates to be recognized as engineering professionals¹³. In European countries the Bologna Accord requires 12 years of education for graduate school admission and for professional practice¹⁴. In some cases graduates of Philippine universities doing graduate work in universities abroad are required to take additional undergraduate courses before they are

finally admitted to graduate school. The same is true for employment seekers. Some are required to take additional courses in college before they are considered for employment. These requirements somehow diminish the value of a college education in the Philippines.

Such is the state of Philippine higher education. There are too many HEIs absorbing high school graduates many of whom are inadequately prepared for college work. There is an oversupply of graduates in certain fields more than half of who are unable to meet professional standards. The poor quality of higher education, the lack of financial resources and the inefficiencies in the system characterize the Philippine higher education today.

International ranker QS has attempted to convince Philippine HEIs to participate in its international ranking, even suggesting that it could do a ranking of Philippine universities using criteria suitable for the Philippines. Head of universities who met with QS representatives expressed little interest in being ranked. They argued that many of them are already participating in accreditation processes the outcomes of which would be as useful to the students in their choice of university. Moreover, they said that with a few exceptions, most Philippine universities are at present teaching universities with very little research on record. They have therefore little chance of ranking well in international surveys that give much weight to publications and citations. Besides, QS requires a participation fee of at least \$12,000.

Because international rankings use criteria that are biased for those with huge endowments especially in research, Philippine HEIs do not stand much of a

chance to do well in international surveys. Moreover unless inefficiencies in the system are removed Philippine HEIs will have difficulty competing for international recognition. Government intervention is necessary to help remove these inefficiencies. It should do serious regulatory work and provide incentives to promote quality higher education.

CHED's decision to declare a moratorium on the opening of oversubscribed programs and the closure of programs that perform poorly in licensure examinations must be pursued relentlessly. CHED also said it will establish a system of classification or a typology of universities and colleges which should be useful for a number of purposes including the allocation of resources and the determination on where to add the two years under the K+12 system. This typology of institutions which help distinguish research universities from community colleges, from polytechnics, technical schools, open universities etc. should help lead to more optimal allocation of scarce resources.

On the other hand HEIs need to transform themselves into institutions that will operate as universities in the strictest sense. This requires looking into admission standards, faculty selection and development, institution of university level courses/programs, attention to research and knowledge generation and creation, and governance structure that promotes excellence.

For now quality higher education in the Philippines is measured not by ranking but through accreditation¹⁵ that is acceptable to Philippine HEIs. Here there is no pitting of one institution against the other. What are accredited are programs, not institutions. On the other hand CHED and DBM have instituted the leveling instrument, which measures standards for SUCs on quality and excellence, relevance

and responsiveness, access and equity. The leveling instrument identifies the stage of development a university or college is in. In this leveling, institutions are assessed on the basis of their institutional mission – instruction (50%), research (22%), extension (14%) and management of resources (14%). Publications in international, national and local journals.

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NOTES

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⁵ Source: Association of Pacific Rim Universities (APRU)

⁶ Source: Philippine Commission on Higher Education (CHED)

⁷ Nuffic Neso Vietnam, Vietnam’s Higher Education: Trends and Strategies, October 2009

⁸ Education in Japan, from http://www.nier.go.jp/English/Education_in_Japan/Education-in-Japan-files_201109HE.pdf

⁹ CHED closes deficient nursing, maritime schools from http://www.usc.edu.ph/news_and_announcements/index.jsp?news

¹⁰ Source of data: CHED, November 30, 2010

¹¹ Source of data: Professional Regulatory Commission

¹² Department of Education, Discussion paper on the enhances K+12 basic education program, October 5, 2010

¹³ International Engineering Alliance: The Washington Accord, from <http://www.washingtonaccord.org/Washington-Accord/FAQ.cfm>

¹⁴ Op cit, Department of Education

¹⁵ There are four accrediting institution: the Philippine Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges and Universities (PAASCU), the Philippine Association of Colleges and Universities – Commission on Accreditation (PACU-COA), the Association of Christian Schools, Colleges, Universities Accrediting Agencies (ACSCU-AA) and the Accrediting Association of Chartered Colleges and Universities of the Philippines (AACUP).