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Rankings: The stakes are high  
James Campbell

HENRY Kissinger is often attributed to have said, “The reason academic politics are so bitter is that so little is at stake”.

Is the debate over university rankings an example of another arcane academic intellectual debate only of interest to educationists? Or does this debate signify and represent something far more important and critical? The current flow of articles, opinion and rejoinders on the issue of university rankings in the Malaysian media is definitely full of sound and fury and the number of participants from vice chancellors through to government ministers and newspaper editors increasingly is revealing to the public at large that something very important is finally being debated and argued about in the open and in a no holds barred fashion. However, what really does it all signify? What is at issue? What is at stake? Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Khaled Nordin in an article titled Khaled: Only Certain Criteria Considered (NST, May 16) was quoted in response to the latest QS Asian University Rankings 2010 as saying that “rankings of universities only consider certain aspects and the methodology used is not fully comprehensive” and that, “a lot of other aspects, such as community engagement, their niche areas and contribution to societal development, were not taken into consideration in the rankings”. It is heartening to see government ministers publicly say what many critics have been saying for a long time. Two recent opinion pieces in the NST, however, bring the salient issues to focus in ways that may provide us with an even deeper way to engage what truly are the issues and what is at stake in the entire rankings debate. Firstly, Phil Baty, deputy editor of Times Higher Education magazine and editor of the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings, wrote in an article titled Open to Complete Review (May 16) that “all those who have used our rankings to pass judgment on the state of Malaysian higher education must be told that the annual tables had some serious flaws which I, as rankings editor, have a responsibility to put right”. Baty reminds his readers that rankings are often used to score political points and illustrates this with reference to the polemic of opposition leaders in the Malaysian political landscape. Baty’s argument which he has made in a series of pieces appearing in the NST, The Star and The Straits Times is that in essence the previous QS rankings measure was deeply flawed and unfit for the purpose for which it was intended. Three critical points suggest themselves from the discourse that Baty articulates: 1) Rankings as an issue has political upshot. 2) Rankings are now a business with contending rankings organisations vying for market share. L The legitimacy of rankings rises or falls on questions of methodology.

This brings us to the second opinion piece that appeared in the NST along with Baty’s contribution. A. Murad Merican’s piece titled Universities Need a Linguistic Turn (May 16) is an important rejoinder to the rankings discourse.

In his article, Murad reminds us that the rankings debate is deeply business oriented and infused with economic interest and that what the rankings exercise does “is to ‘commoditise’ universities for the next stage in the architectonics of the global economy”. Murad then proceeds to show the political dimension to rankings and that it is “ideological”. He writes: “There is a clear power relation, a patronising attitude towards Asia and other regions from the perspective of dominance. Would this not be an ideological exercise casting supremacy of knowledge and advancement over other cultures?” Finally, he recognises the methodological issues at stake when he asks, “can there be a perfect methodology of measuring universities’
performance in the national and cultural context?" In short, Murad’s piece offers us a deeper insight into the political, economic and methodological problems that inform the discourse of rankings. Of course, Murad is not the only one to recognise these broader dimensions to the debate, but his position provides us with the beginnings of a deeper engagement with what is at stake in the whole rankings argument. Murad’s criticism of the “positivistic world view” is a clear recognition that not everything can be reduced to use value, numbers and instrumental efficiency, but it is an apparently simple sentence that provides the biggest challenge for those who are concerned about the direction of higher education and society in general. He writes, “Our universities have lost that ‘metaphysical centre’”. It is very rare in discussions over rankings to read such a sentence. Yet it points to something that is very important. What is it that is vital in Malaysian higher education? Is the vitality that should be at the centre of Malaysian higher education recognition of the moral and ethical role that education plays in Malaysian society? Is it illustrated by a commitment to sustainability and alleviating poverty and misery? Is it something else? If ethical and moral commitments are considered central and vital to Malaysian higher education and its proper mission, then who ranks these? Where do they fit in the rankings debate? These questions will not go away just because some people say rankings are here to stay.

Critics of rankings claim that rankings offer on the whole a simplistic measure of quality and that they are by no means definitive. Critics point out that they measure what can be measured rather than what is necessarily considered important by an institution. The extent to which rankings are based on convenient data which is easily available rather than on data which is difficult to obtain or requiring significant effort is also another issue. Thus arises the issue of methodological validity as well as cultural and political context. The political, social, cultural conditions and environments, in which institutions function and operate affect how they work and what they do. However, differing institutional contexts make international comparisons theoretically complex and difficult. Ranking tables provide us with highly condensed comparative information between institutions, however the critical question is. How useful is this kind of information? How reliable is the data? How reliable can it be given the diversity of universities and their respective missions and cultural environments? Clearly the issue of validity and reliability is of central concern and the recent revelations by Baty of the flaws in the QS rankings should give us all some reason to pause before we simply accept on trust any new system. This leads us to a critical point which was raised in Murad’s opinion. Should Malaysian universities have a rethink about participating in the rankings in the first place? To suggest that universities should reconsider their participation in rankings is of course not a new proposition. For example, in 1999, 35 universities from Asia and the Pacific, declined to provide data to Asiaweek for its annual ranking of universities in the region. Those that refused included the University of Tokyo and 19 other Chinese universities, including Peking University, as well as 15 other institutions. More recently in 2006, 11 Canadian universities including McMaster University and the University of British Columbia indicated that they would not participate in Maclean’s Magazines annual ranking of Canadian universities. Other efforts by US higher educational institutions to boycott US News and World Report rankings have also been initiated. Finally in Malaysia, Universiti Sains Malaysia has refused to participate in the latest QS rankings survey as a protest against what Professor Tan Sri Dzulkifli Abdul Razak politely refers to as “methodological flaws”. Baty referred in his argument to the “national shame” that some politicians feel at the fall in position of Malaysian universities against externally designed rankings tables. Perhaps the real shame is not that Malaysian institutions rise or fall against rankings tables that are methodologically flawed. The real shame may be that the things that are vital to Malaysians, such as values and culture and a commitment to serving society seem no longer to count or be
counted. It’s time we ranked Malaysian institutions in reference to these values and these commitments and stopped fretting over how we rank against standards not set by Malaysians and which we now know are deeply flawed and problematic.

Finally, Kissinger was wrong. Sometimes academic disputes really are important and sometimes the stakes are very high indeed. The rankings debate is one such example.

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