How trustworthy are varsity rankings?
By Dr. James Campbell

THE recent release of the Times Higher Education Supplement University Rankings has again set tongues wagging on the relative status of higher educational institutions around the world.

The big news with regard to the latest round of rankings is the relative rise of Asian universities against the powerhouse universities in the United States.

According to the latest THES data, the move by Universiti Malaya up the THES ranking table from 230 to 180 and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia's improvement from 356 last year to 320 will no doubt hearten many.

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's slide to 291 from 250 last year and Universiti Putra Malaysia's drop to 345 from 320 is sobering. Universiti Sains Malaysia dipped slightly to 314 from 313 last year.

University rankings appear to be a volatile endeavour with universities going up suddenly and falling just as suddenly. The spectacular rise of UM is a case in point.

It ranked 89 in 2004; 169 in 2005; 192 in 2006; 246 in 2007; and 230 last year. Such volatility should give pause to the way we analyse and understand the meaning of these rankings.

Several questions present themselves given this volatility. Why are the rankings so volatile? Do universities really change that much from year to year?

Analysts point out that the THES puts significant value on internationalisation and international reputation, based in large measure on reputational surveys which are themselves open to wide variation and volatility.

Consider for example the fall in ranking that UM suffered from 2004 through to 2005. Does anyone really believe that standards really fell so suddenly and sharply in one year?

If standards did not fall so precipitously, what then caused such a decline in ranking?

How trustworthy are such rankings? What exactly is going on to make a prestigious university rise and fall so suddenly?

The volatility of reputation and the methodology used by the THES goes some way to explaining this. This volatility suggests that the long term effectiveness of the THES as a basis for understanding university performance is questionable.

For example the Shanghai Jiao Tong rankings are in some ways methodologically superior to the THES since they measure outputs and not reputation.

However, the Shanghai Index is also limited because it focuses on research and publications rather than a broader array of indicators.
In other words the Shanghai Index does not really measure things such as community building, solving global problems or helping in the critical assessment of society’s problems.

While the THES may add to institutional reputation in a good year, its volatility suggests that its negative impact on institutional reputation is also of deep concern. The Shanghai Index, while more "objective", fails to measure the more intangible yet critically significant impact of universities on the common good and civic engagement.

Critical problems with contemporary league tables as currently articulated include a failure to provide adequate data on teaching and learning, they rely on homogenous models of Anglo-American research-intensive universities, and they reinforce the reputation of already powerful institutions at the expense of up and coming ones.

One of the main issues with league tables of universities is that they tend to militate against diversity.

In other words, such rankings tend to measure universities against a similar homogenous global market of research universities and measure performance in a way that can be easily put in league tables for the purposes of easy comparison and understanding.