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Ranking Singapore's universities: What outcomes, and for whom?

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Published 03 JULY, 2018

UPDATED 03 JULY, 2018





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...that every institution has a different focus and distinctive objective (**Global ranking systems barely reflect universities' individual strengths: Expert panel**”; June 29).

These are clearly defined problems.

What is less clear, however, are not only the precise outcomes or indicators that the universities would like to measure, but also the target audience of these metrics and the purpose of these measurements.

Students and faculty members, for instance and in general, are likely to prioritise a school's strength in teaching and in research differently. Furthermore, comparing academic and vocational educational outcomes may not be as straightforward.

The perceived disjoint between the global ranking systems and the strengths of a university also stems from the methodology of the rankings, which reflect the biases of the respective institutions, of what they deem to be important traits of a “good” university.

The Times Higher Education World University Rankings consider the five areas of teaching, research, citations, international outlook, and industry income, while the QS World University Rankings take into account the six metrics of academic reputation, employer reputation, faculty-to-student ratio, citations per faculty, international faculty ratio, and international student ratio.

One could first argue whether, or the extent to which, these areas or metrics are fair indicators of good schools, and the likelihood that university administrators could be incentivised to game the system.

The second question is how the data was collected and aggregated.

And given that university administrators are still working to define and to operationalise appropriate “outcomes”, the “for whom” question should be emphasised.

In the article, Singapore Management University provost Lily Kong asked: “How do we assess outcomes? How do we know that an education is well-delivered and well-received?”

Education Minister Ong Ye Kung highlighted that a new metric should reflect three major focus areas: The value of a degree education, lifelong learning, and impactful research.

Perhaps a more meaningful approach would be to find out what individuals expect from the university, before exploring how these expectations can be reconciled with a broader national agenda.

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