

# University ratings system is unconvincing

## The ranking system of universities is based on published papers. It does not recognise the normative aspects of good teaching

An industry for university ranking came into being in 2004. But the best universities were already known to scholars. Institutions like BARC, TIFR, ISI, DSE were known as excellent institutions in India and abroad and are known even now as such. Similarly, in the English-speaking world, Cambridge, Oxford, LSE, Harvard, MIT, UC Berkeley were known as the best places to study; so are they today. This is because of the quality of their teaching and the institutional ethos that has enabled it.

Hence, many serious academics across the world are unhappy with ranking systems, primarily because of the absence of valid quickly implementable measurements for quality of teaching and research. Present ranking systems emphasise research “output”. Higher the research output, higher the rank. Consequence — universities and institutions push professors to publish more. Emphasis on research output has resulted in two more very profitable industries — publishing and conferences.

The number of conferences and the number of journals (therefore, the number of published papers) have skyrocketed in the recent past. Most conferences are like *melas*, where many universities set up stalls for admission and faculty recruitment. They are places for networking rather than serious academic conferencing. Publishers make a beeline to fund these conferences. Conference proceedings are now replaced by journals attached to conferences so that funding publishers can make more money.

A few years back, a renowned scientist, associated with “The Origins Project” at the Arizona State University remarked that the number of books and research papers is inversely proportional to the quantum of knowledge they contain or generate. There are more writers now, and fewer readers. Everyone is an editor or a reviewer of some journal. They form networks. Join one network or perish! Many journals charge high submission fee unheard of earlier.

Some editorial boards are too large to believe. The desperation to publish is so intense that many have started their own journal. “How to publish” seminars, not how to do to research, have become commonplace.

Thus, another new industry for journal ranking has been created. Where you publish is more important than what you publish! Professors are now asked to get funds for research. Yuval Noah Harari, in *Sapiens*, elaborates an excellent example of how to win a research grant. Fund is more important than academic integrity! Peter W Higgs was reportedly criticised for not publishing enough before he was awarded the Nobel in Physics in 2013. Book publishing has become another business. Nowadays, “academic” books are “launched”! Everyone is an author. The original sense of “author” (a person who invents or causes something) has lost its significance. Names of Indian professors are added to the list of foreign authors of textbooks written by them (obviously, with some technical requirements).

Education today, so to speak, is a set of profitable businesses — university ranking, publishing journals and books, conferences, journal ranking, research grants, admissions and so forth.

Selection of appropriate academics and creation of conducive rigorous academic environment have taken a back seat. Consequently, institutions recruit driftwoods not potential organically growing trees. Conferences, publishing papers, writing books, and associated activities keep the jet-setting and wealthy professors busy like their political or corporate counterparts.

## **Unlike earlier era**

This was not so in an earlier era. Many great institutions have been founded in pre- and post-independent India. Prasanta C Mahalanobis, founder of ISI Kolkata, is believed to have said “find your own work, my job ended when I had selected you”, to a recently recruited young professor who asked him what he was expected to do. That is the spirit.

Selection of a professor is the most important task. Once the right person is recruited, trust her/him. Period. VKRV Rao, founder of DSE, was another illustrious institution builder, credited for high quality economics education and research in India.

Homi Bhabha created world class institutions of scientific research.

But, today, teaching has been adversely affected by new yardsticks. A well decorated course outline (syllabus), with a single prescribed textbook, and every topic punctuated by a chapter and a section number in that book, has taken the centre-stage rather than what gets delivered in class. A teacher is rewarded for “popularity”, as it were, based on students’ evaluations! The more drama I can do in class, the more popular I become. No one cares about content or the lack of it. When students’ evaluations become a factor in professor’s promotion, situations turn murkier, sometimes resulting in what is now known as grade inflation.

Education administrators must focus on building academic institutions rather than running them as business houses and stop promoting businesses mentioned earlier. They must: (1) focus on selection of high quality academics with high integrity; (2) create and encourage a

high quality academic environment as opposed to one driven by numbers; and (3) make students realise the differences between a human being and being human.

Rabindranath Thakur wonderfully portrayed the modern education system in a Bengali short story called *Tota Kahini* (Parrot Tale), in 1918. A shackled parrot (student), wings clipped (discipline), in a gold cage (infrastructure) was dead; stuffed paper (reading materials) rustled when the king (administrator) poked it. In 1952, Albert Einstein said, in a lecture in New York, "... with specialised knowledge - (a student) more closely resembles a well-trained dog than a harmoniously developed person."

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