

Impacts of University Rankings in Korea

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In our daily life the tendency toward comparison is one of our essential attributes and ordinary people naturally show interest in ranking things, individuals or groups of people in various aspects. Popular items of comparison in Korea are university rankings. High school students and their parents consider university rankings as one important factor in deciding where to submit application forms for entrance. These days, government, funding agencies, media, and universities pay attention to annual announcements of university rankings from various organizations. Their interest in international university rankings have been increasing in the last ten years due to the fact that the role of universities is getting more important in the knowledge economy and the quality and impact of education and research in universities is considered as a basis for national competitiveness in a global context.

National rankings of universities in Korea are generated by some major newspapers, such as the *Joong Ang Ilbo* and the *Chosun Ilbo*. Some of the indicators in rankings are the faculty/student ratio, the number of (SCI) papers per faculty member, research funding per faculty member, scholarships per student, the employment rate of graduates, the retention rate, etc. International rankings with a powerful influence in Korea are the World University Rankings by Times Higher Education (THE), the QS World University Rankings, and Chosun Ilbo-QS Asian University Rankings published by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS). Indicators in these rankings are, according to QS's Wikipedia (n.d.) page, academic peer review (40%), the faculty/student ratio (20%), citations per faculty member (20%), recruiter reviews (10%), and international orientation (10%).

The university ranking business has been growing rapidly in the last ten years, thanks to the development of new technology which enables us to track and collect various information. The *Joong Ang Ilbo* uses the data from the Ministry of Education and the National Research Foundation. THE draws its ranking data from Thomson Reuters, and the QS World University Rankings uses data from Scopus, part of Elsevier. As the Wikipedia page (n.d.) on the QS World Rankings states:

The information used to compile the World University Rankings comes partly from the online surveys carried out by QS, partly from Scopus, and partly from an annual information-gathering exercise carried out by QS itself. QS collects data from universities directly, from their web sites and publications, and from national bodies.

However, there have been strong criticisms of the influence of university rankings and their methodologies. For example, according to Declan Butler (2010), "many universities see wild swings in their rankings from year to year, which cannot reflect real changes in quality. They focus excessively on research output, neglecting the many other crucial roles that universities have." The indicator 'faculty student ratio,' the single factor related to education, cannot reflect the quality of education. The outputs from scientific research are many and varied. *Nature* also notes that disciplines have different citation rates, and that league tables lump universities with different objectives. In addition to that, most rankings use reputational surveys. One argument is that these assessments often use relatively too few reviewers, who may not be well informed about all the universities they are being asked to judge, and that in world rankings there may be a bias towards English-speaking countries.

A good sign is that the ranking agencies are now trying to improve their operating system by promising to rank universities according to additional criteria and to compare institutions with similar missions.

In Korea, university rankings have played a strong role in stimulating innovation in the university environment, encouraging faculty to speed up in producing their research outputs as measured by the number of SCI papers, impact factors and citation indexes. Annual reports on university rankings have been influencing policy-makers to increase their investments in higher education. As a result, the ranks of Korean universities have been increasing rapidly. For example, in QS World University Rankings, Seoul National University: 93('05) → 35('13), KAIST: 198('06) → 60('13), POSTEC: 233('07) → 107('13), Yonsei University: 236('07) → 114('13). We note that the QS Asian University Rankings of the above 4 universities in 2013 are 4, 6, 7, 16, respectively.

The problem is that government, funding agencies, and university administrators have been driving the academic community to consider the university rankings as a kind of prime goal of university life. As a result, until recently, most professors gave their energy mainly to publishing papers in quantitative terms, more or less neglecting their role in the classroom and the value and impact of scientific outputs. Fortunately, the academic environment in Korea is changing now to pursue its effort in qualitative terms.

In view of the arguments above, it seems that it is about time for the global academic community to review all international rankings and to declare new directions and principles for fulfillment of fundamental roles of higher education, like 'the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment' announced on May 20, 2013. For the improvement of assessment of higher education, we should check both positive and negative impacts of university rankings on education and research against the question, "Is the world university rank of a university really a meaningful gauge of the global standing of the university?"

References

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