

## **Why is Vietnam Missing from the Top 300 of the Asia University Rankings?**

Professor Vu Ngoc Hai, from the Department of Information and Communication Engineering at Myongji University in South Korea, suggested that the reason Vietnamese universities never appear in regional and global rankings is because nobody can be expected to be ranked in a competition if they decide not to compete.

### **Universities worldwide invest much money to be included and maintain their rankings**

The Times Higher Education magazine recently published a ranking of the 300 leading universities in Asia, and sadly but not surprisingly Vietnamese universities are completely absent. What surprised me most was the presence of seven universities from Pakistan, a country that is much poorer and more backward than Vietnam.

Let's first of all search an answer to why Vietnam is usually absent from both regional and global university rankings. Having worked for many years in university education in Vietnam, the US, and South Korea, I don't find it difficult to see the one reason: Vietnamese universities don't feel the need or set themselves the target of entering the rankings.



*The National University of Singapore (NUS) is ranked first in the Times Higher Education magazine Asia University Rankings 2017 (Photo: Reuters)*

### **Why is that?**

Of course, universities worldwide do not invest all that money in their being listed with the sole purpose of obtaining pride and honor, or to put it bluntly, they don't enter to "take selfies together". It is all related to economic goals.

All universities have two main sources of income: student tuitions and income from research projects. How rankings influence a university's income from tuitions is something we can understand right away. Let's consider Singapore as an example. Imagine that one day the National University of Singapore "naturally" drops out of the top ten. Local and international students will immediately turn to its rival Nanyang. This is why NUS must, at any cost, invest in maintaining its ranking.

### **Increasing their rankings is the easiest way for universities to maximize earnings**

Money from tuitions are often limited by the national government, though, to avoid universities being too thrifty and not guaranteeing education and training goals. Income obtained from research projects, from its side, is very different in Vietnam, in that foreign universities are allowed to profit from research projects.

Laws in other countries, such as in South Korea where I am lecturing, allow schools to keep up to 40% of the cost of a research project. This is obviously a massive amount, because research projects financed by other countries are usually huge. This source of income easily eclipses income from student tuitions.

Research funds often prioritize universities with high rankings and with many skilled professors. A university only needs to attract one skilled professor able to obtain big research projects to obtain an income comparable to enrolling hundreds of new students. Investing in the development of research to increase rankings is obviously the easiest way for a university to maximize its earnings. Although considered to be much poorer than Vietnam, Pakistan has seven universities in this top 300.

### **What happened to Vietnam?**

In Vietnam it's completely the other way around. Rankings have no influence whatsoever on the "livelihood" of a university, such that schools basically have no reason at all to "compete" in these university rankings.

Considering enrollment, universities abroad are usually multi-disciplinary, and each discipline competes with many other schools. This is why rankings are the most efficient method of competition.

In Vietnam, universities are mostly specialized schools. There is no reason for the University of Transport to compete with Thuyloi University, or for the Banking Academy to compete with the Foreign Trade University.

There are three major national universities, the Vietnam National Universities in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, and the University of Danang, but they have no reason to compete with each other either because the three are located in three different parts of the country, and local enrollments suffice them. Competition might come from private universities, but these are usually too weak to compete in international rankings.

A ray of hope, however, comes from Nguyen Tat Thanh University and FPT University, which entered the QS ranking, and from Duy Tan University, which has been investing strongly in high-quality lecturers and scientific research and which has gained a firm foothold in the education market. This shows the necessity of entering university rankings in the future.

Income from research is almost nonexistent at Vietnamese universities, because policy and law as good as prohibit universities to profit from research. This is why schools have no reason whatsoever to promote research or to invest in facilities for research activities.

Having once managed Science at a Vietnamese university, I consider this to be unsound and that it will easily lead to negative effects. So for the future I hope that Vietnamese policy on science and technology will change and allow universities to profit directly from research projects. This will stimulate schools to improve their lecturing corps and lead to the competitive goals of university ranking.

### **Lessons from Pakistan**

Let's return to what we can learn from Pakistan. With seven universities in the Times Higher Education ranking nonetheless, it shows they have a sound policy and are correctly following the rules of international university education.

As a professor at a South Korean university I have seen a surge in Pakistani research student numbers. And these students, when they return home, often become university professors with many perks concerning salary, scholarships, and research conditions. Meanwhile, Vietnamese students often don't intend to return home or they don't intend to work in education and training, even though they are very talented and enjoyed their education in a developed country. Vietnamese universities clearly show some major policy differences with the rest of the world.

*(Media Center)*