



Guanrong (Ron) Chen

Editor-in-Chief, *IEEE Circuits and Systems Magazine*

University rankings, bane or boon?

Like it or not, it's there. Not only is it there, it grows continuously and rapidly in various forms playing different roles in academia and politics as well as economics. It has been an entrenched phenomenon for years, considered as a source of information and a measure of quality assessment by many. I'm talking about university ranking systems. The result of these various systems is an almost overwhelming emphasis on public image and consumer satisfaction of a university due to the pressures from the public and media today. Such pressures may gradually but inexorably undermine some of the well-established traditional academic standards and values of our great universities.

University rankings have become so controversial in academic circles as well as to the public that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) formally addressed the question by holding a global forum entitled *Rankings and Accountability in Higher Education: Uses and Misuses* at the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, France on May 16–17 of this year. The forum was co-organized with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and the World Bank, and was attended by more than 250 participants from 68 countries, including representatives of world-leading ranking systems, senior management personnel of educational organizations and institutes, researchers, students, and policy-makers, as well as media from all around the world. In addition, tens of thousands of concerned individuals virtually participated via *Twitter*.

The core issues debated there included such questions as: Are university rankings a good measure for comparing institutions of higher education? Are the criteria used in ranking systems relevant to students everywhere? Do they wield too much influence on policies of universities? And so on.

In her opening speech, UNESCO Director General Dr. Irina Bokova said that "On the issues of rankings and accountability, questions abound." She asked, "What are the drivers behind the proliferation of rankings? Do rank-

ings measure what they need to measure? What is not being measured? Is the quality of an education adequately reflected? Is the goal of accountability being served fully? Finally, what is and should be the impact of such assessments on public policy?" She stated, "These are difficult questions that merit our sharpest collective thinking." That kicked off the opening of the forum.

Delegates spent two full days debating the uses and misuses of university rankings and accountability in higher education. Almost all of the participants were intellectuals and academics, and according to news reports their discussions were professional and non-confrontational. Yet, reportedly there was a moment of palpable tension in the auditorium when Dr. Ellen Hazelkorn, Vice President of Research and Enterprise at the Dublin Institute of Technology, delivered her keynote speech in the opening. Dr. Hazelkorn is well-known for her recent book *Rankings and the Reshaping of Higher Education: The Battle for World-Class Excellence* (Palgrave Macmillan, UK, April 2011). In her speech, she said "rankings appear to be a simple and easy way to measure performance," but, she added, "Do rankings measure what counts?" She also asked whether "they actually raise standards" for things like industrial student-recruitment and government research funding, which thereby might actually "undermine a broader vision to provide education." Today's total number of universities in the world is estimated to be more than fifteen thousand, but the rankings are dominated only by a "small league of well-endowed universities, in English-speaking countries, usually with a medical school," she commented.

Indeed, global education does not simply aim at promoting just a few world-class universities. From a worldwide view, according to Dr. Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić, Head of the UNESCO Higher Education Section, higher education enrollment of students was predicted to reach 263 million in 2025 from 158 million today. "Accommodating the additional 98 million students would require more than four major universities (30,000 students) to open every week for the next 15 years," she said in the forum closing highlights. Therefore, to nurture and train these generations of current and future students, universities will have to step up to the proverbial plate and play a major role in quality teaching and learning. In other words, teaching and learning as

well as community services should be important yardsticks for university rankings.

These key components, however, have been lightly-weighted if not ignored by current ranking criteria which use only a few numerical parameters to evaluate a rather comprehensive university, based mostly on quantitative data rather than qualitative measures. According to a UNESCO report, university rankings were first used as an information tool aimed at satisfying public demand for transparency and conformity to hierarchical notions of “compliance”, which have come to be regarded as a measure of quality and literally spurred intense competition among established institutions of higher education.

In reality, they have been transformed into policy-instruments that influence the decisions of institution and government policy-makers, academic staff and researchers, as well as students and parents. Noticeably, international competition in rankings among universities has led to a re-evaluation of our educational systems. International competition and comparisons could be positive and useful, of course, “but no ranking ever says how to promote quality higher education open to all which fulfils its three missions of research, teaching and service to the community,” noted Dr. Irina Bokova.

Nevertheless, many people view these issues on the bright side. Given the fact that university rankings have been in place for years and they have become so widespread and gained such strong influence, it would be better to take advantage of their benefits. Dr. Kevin Downing, Senior Coordinator Academic Planning and Quality

Assurance from my institution, the City University of Hong Kong, presented a talk in the forum entitled “*What’s the use of rankings? - Using rankings to drive internal quality improvements.*” After a short discussion on what is wrong with some current rankings, Kevin spoke about what is right about these rankings. He stated that rankings provide comparative measures of institutions’ global standing and they can foster healthy competition among the best higher education institutions; rankings can be effective self-evaluation tools for universities to bring about practical positive strategic change that will benefit both stakeholders and students; rankings are here to stay, so we’d better make the best use of them. He also used our university as an example to argue that ranking criteria can be used to identify appropriate benchmarks in line with institutional aspirations, so that strategies can then be developed to address issues of accountability and improve quality.

University rankings appear to be both a bane and boon to higher education. By its very nature, a university’s tremendous potential lies in much more than just a handful of criteria used in current ranking systems. Albert Einstein once said, “*Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.*” Within the context of university rankings, I might rephrase this as “*Not everything that counts has been counted, and not everything that has been counted counts.*”

