**The academic rankings racket**

BY P E R V E Z H O O D B H OY 2020-12-12

OVER half a dozen international `well-reputed` university ranking organisations annually publish their ratings. They tell you which university or department is better than which other, both within a country as well as between countries. Feel f ree to swallow their poisonous bait but do so at your own risk. These cunning ones easily take simpletons for a ride. At best, you will get questionable stuf f. More likely, it will be meaningless nonsense or a fat bunch of lies.

An example: from the website of Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities which ranks thousands of universities globally the department of mechanical engineering at Quaid-eAzam University was rated 76-100 in 2017. This placed it just below Tokyo University and just above Manchester University. Wow! Thereafter every year QAU improved its score and in 2020 it jumpe d into the 51-75 range putting it under McGill University but higher than Oxford University. The reader can google this and may discover other such gems too.

Better than Oxford? Having taught at QAU for the greater part of my life, I could jump for joy. But let the truth be told: QAU does not have a mechanical engineering department! In fact, it does not offer engineering of any kind and none is planned.

A clerical mistake might explain a one-off report.

But what software generated the precise numbers charting QAU`s progress year after year? Laugh if you want but not too loudly. Save some breath for Times Higher Education which declared Abdul Wali Khan University in Mardan as Pakistan`s top university. Unknown for research or teaching, AWKUM is top-most for violent intolerance. In April 2017 a 23-year-old AWKUM student, Mashal Khan, was accused of blasphemy then beaten with sticks and bricks before finally being shot to death. Hundreds of students cheered as he was dragged naked across the campus. They videorecorded the murder with smartphones, then posted it onto their FB pages.

A week later, yet another university ranking organisation called QS put Nust (Islamabad) at Pakistan`s number one and drove AWKUM off the scene. Such fatuous fabrications are galore. Thesecommercial organisations never send inspectors to the thousands of overseas universities they rank.

Instead, they simply email forms to university officials who fill them at will. The ranking criteria are adjusted to benefit the client. Everyone (except the student) makes a f ast buck.

Across the world, ranking organisations have been exposed as inconsistent, changing metrics from year to year, and omitting critical pieces of information. Crooked university professors have also learned to game the system. This speeds up their promotions and brings in cash. In countries with strong academic ethics, success is partial. But in Pakistan, where academic honesty has been in free fall since 2002, it has worked better and better.

Consider: three weeks ago, newspaper headlines across Pakistan blazed with soul-lifting news.

Eighty-one Pakistani scientists had been chosen from 159,683 scientists in universities across the world, ranked by their number of research publications and how often they were cited. Stanford University reportedly declared these 81 luminaries in the world`s top two per cent of scientists.

That`s a total lie! Stanford University has not sanctioned any such report. This doctored news wrongly draws upon the enormous prestige of Stanford. Only one of the four authors, John P.A.

Ioannidis, has a Stanford affiliation. He is a professor of medical statistics while the other three authors are from the private sector. Their published work inputs numbers from an existing database into a computer that crunches them into a list.

That list is meaningless for Pakistan. It does not represent scientific acumen or achievement. Here`s why: generating scientific research papers without knowing any science or doing actual research has been honed into a fine art by academic crooks at home and abroad. At the second stage, the stuff produced has to be published, for which clever professors have developed 99 tricks. The third and most difficult stage is to generate citations after the paper is published.

At this point, the crooked professor relies upon crooked friends to cite him and boost his ratings.

Those friends have their friends in India, China, South Africa, or elsewhere. This international webof connections is known as a citation cartel. Cartel members generate reams of scientific gibberish that the world of mainstream science pays no heed to. But in Pakistan the rewards are handsome you soon become chairman, dean, vice-chancellor, or influence peddler. These gatekeepers shunt out all genuine academics lest they be challenged from below.

Knowing a few individuals who made it to the exalted `Stanford scientist list`, I would be surprised if they could pass a tough high-school-level exam for entering undergraduate studies in a decent university like Stanford. Others I cannot judge: some could certainly be genuine. But for one scientist to judge across fields has become harder in the age of super specialisation. So how to tell? Given what few genuine academics Pakistan has, no satisfactory answer exists. One can expect nothing from the present gatekeepers of academia because fraud is a way of life for most. To spot even 100 genuine academics from among thousands is hard.

Pakistan`s university system may well have crossed the point of no return and be beyond repair. But suppose one refuses to accept this pessimistic conclusion.

How to separate the wheat from the chaf f? Simple: every university and the HEC must demand that any professor claiming credit for a scientific paper must present that work before an informed audience and be appropriately questioned. Credible foreign specialists should be included. Technology allows this to be done remotely (Zoom, Skype, Webex, etc) and to preserve videos for later viewing. Each presentation must explain what that paper has contributed to knowledge production.

This has many pitfalls. Transparency is not a magic wand. Still, it will whittle down the so-called Stanfordlist by 80pc to100pc. Self-congratulations, and official policies that encourage academic dishonesty, have inflicted massive damage upon Pakistan`s higher education system. Without extreme measures, the rot will continue forever.

We must begin now.  The writer taught physics and mathematics at Quaid-e-Azam University for 47 years.