

fluence of global rankings, it is not rare to hear national leaders explicitly stated that the country should have certain number of top universities by a particular time. In 2012, Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia, announced that at least 5 of Russian universities should break into the world-top 100 by 2020. Japan's Prime Minister Abe said in 2013 that the country's aim was to have 10 universities in the world-top 100. While the high expectation from the national leaders would usually lead to extra and concentrated investment to selected universities, and some good results must come; the pursuit of higher ranking or more top-ranked universities should not be encouraged until the rankings are based on what a university or a country really wants. ■

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## The *Times Higher Education* Rankings and the Mysterious “Rise of Asia”

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There are, broadly speaking, three types of rankings in higher education. There are those that are put out by independent agencies which are not connected to a media outlet, such as the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU—also known as the Shanghai rankings) or the new annual rankings from the Middle East Technical University in Turkey. These groups simply post their data on a Web site and leave it to others to interpret. There are also rankings published by media outlets for which the rankings are simply a hook to hang an annual bout of coverage of higher education issues that are largely unconnected to the data itself. Canada's *Maclean's* rankings have always used this format as—to a significant extent—has *US News and World Report*. Finally, there are media rankings, for which the rankings are the story. And here, the *Times Higher Education* rankings lead the way.

The problem with making the ranking the story is that there is a need for a narrative. But good rankings—i.e., rankings that reflect the reality that quality in higher education is something built over decades, not years—simply do not provide a lot of movement from year to year. In the past, for instance, *US News* was (not always fairly) accused of changing its methodology every year, to change the out-

comes in order to create new narratives. *THE* has avoided this kind of chicanery over the past few years, and by and large their rankings have been characterized by a significant level of stability. This puts the paper in something of a quandary: how can rankings drive a narrative when very little changes from year-to-year?

### THE RESULTS FOR EAST ASIA

Fortunately for the *THE*, the research-concentration policies of many East Asian governments—such as Project 985 in China, Brain 21 in Korea, and others—have resulted in ever-increasing publication and citation counts for about 20 or so universities in the region. As a result, these institutions have over the years seen a steady rise in their ranking position, which has allowed the *THE* to run a steady series of “The Rise of Asia” stories. Asian universities appreciated the coverage and reciprocated by giving the *THE* a fair amount of business in advertising sales and conference traffic. But when the *THE* ran stories on “The Rise of Asia” in its 2014 rankings, it was acting out of force of habit, rather than a sober analysis of the data.

The evidence for a rise of Asia in the actual rankings table clearly does not lie in the top 50. Tokyo University and the University of Hong Kong were unchanged in their position this year from last. Peking University rose one place and National University of Singapore rose three; but Tsinghua University in China fell one place, and Seoul National University fell six. All told, this is a “no change” for the continent.

Going down from positions 50 to 200 in the rankings, we see a mix of good and bad, at least among East Asian universities. Nearly all the Japanese universities saw double-digit falls in places, as did National Taiwan University and Chinese University of Hong Kong. In Korea, Postech fell six places from 60th to 66th, while Yonsei University fell out of the top 200 altogether. Among East Asian universities that in the previous year ranked between 50 and 200, only two (Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology and Hong Kong University of Science and Technology) rose in the rankings. Offsetting this poor performance to some degree somewhat were the rise into the top 200 of City University of Hong Kong (192nd), Fudan University in China (193rd) and Korea's Sungkyunkwan University (148th). So, while there was a net gain of 2 institutions in the top 200, the average position of East Asian universities fell somewhat. By any sensible measure, this is a mixed picture and not an unequivocal “rise.”

### TURKEY RESCUES ASIA

So how then did the *THE* come up with a claim of a “rise of Asia”? Well, the paper does not say so directly in its news coverage, but it was mostly because of Turkey. The

only Turkish institution that was previously in the top 200, Bogazici University, jumped 60 places to 139th. Istanbul Technical University rose from the 201–225 band (below 200, *Times* does not offer specific ranks but rather sensibly places institutions in bands) to 165th. Middle East Technical University rose from the same band to 85th, while Sabanci University went from being unranked to 182nd position.

So why are Turkish universities suddenly hot? Richard Holmes, who runs the University Ranking blog, provides a cogent answer. He has pointed out that a single paper (the widely cited “Observation of a new boson...” in *Physics Letters B*, which announced the confirmation of the Higgs Boson) was responsible for most of the movement in this year’s

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rankings. This paper had over 2,800 coauthors, including from those suddenly big Turkish universities. Because the *THE* does not fractionally count multiple-authored articles, each institution which has a coauthor on the paper gets to count all of the citations. And since the *THE*’s methodology on citations is structured to in effect give many “bonus points” to universities located in countries where scientific publications are low, this blew some schools’ numbers into the stratosphere and not just in Turkey. Other examples of this are Scuola Normale di Pisa in Italy, which came from literally out of nowhere to be ranked 65th in the world, or Federica Santa Maria Technical University in Chile, which managed this year to become the 4th ranked university in Latin America.

#### **A TREND OR A FLUKE?**

So basically, the entire factual basis for this year’s “rise of Asia” story was based almost entirely on the fact that a few of the 2,800 coauthors on the “Observation of a new boson...” paper happened to work in Turkey. That makes it a statistical quirk and nothing whatsoever to do with the long-term rise of universities in rising economies in China and the rest of East Asia. Indeed, many of these institutions seem to have gone into reverse, leading one to question if there are any circumstances under which the *THE* would choose not to run a “rise of Asia” headline.

The *THE*, commendably, has recently begun public

consultations to review its methodologies. Clearly, its policies on counting citations are badly in need of an overhaul. But, perhaps some thought should be given, too, to its editorial policies: the obsession with portraying a rampant Asia is not doing the paper any favors. ■

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## Confronting the Challenges of Graduate Education in Sub-Saharan Africa

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The colonial origins of most of African higher education resulted in graduate education being ignored at their origin. The view was that, if graduate education was needed, students could travel to the colonial motherland. Thus, the current state of graduate education in sub-Saharan Africa can rightly be described as a consequence of the deleterious impact of the past and challenges that have faced higher education since the 1970s.

#### **CHALLENGES FOR GRADUATE EDUCATION**

By the mid-1970s both the environment for higher education and its status were in decline. The effects on most graduate education programs were devastating. The economy was in crisis in most African countries, some governments had come to regard universities as bastions of unwelcome criticism and centers of opposition, costs seemed too high, faculty and student life-styles questionable, and the utility of universities and graduate programs in particular, suddenly seemed limited.

The decline in international development assistance to higher education and the shift in focus to primary education with an emphasis on “education for all” contributed to the problems. The decline in state and donor funding is starkly illustrated by the reduction in per capita public spending for higher education, which fell from US\$6,800 in 1980, to US\$1,200 in 2002, and by 2009 averaged just US\$981 in 33 African countries. This is a staggering decrease of 82 percent.