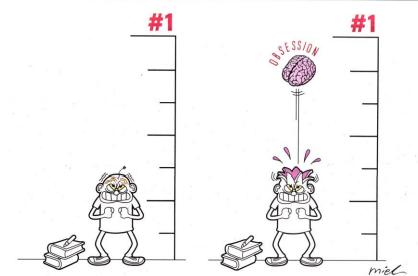
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Putting university rankings in perspective

Such rankings influence flows of talent and funds, but students should consider their interests and quality of programmes.



Senior Education Correspondent

The National University of Singapore (NUS) and the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) have generally fared well in the league tables that rank universities in the region and worldwide. But should they now stop playing the often maddening rankings game? This is a question being asked by some as such tables continue to molificate – sometimes paintime proliferate - sometimes painting starkly different pictures.

In the last two weeks alone, three minings were released - the nonual World University Ranking ecompiled by London-based education consultancy Quacquarell symonds, Asia's from ost innovative universities list by Reuters and the Times Higher Education World Reputation Rankings. More will follow in the weeks and months ahead - including the top Asian universities list, the young universities rankings, top 50 under 90 (50 years of get hat 8). Of 60 years of get hat 8). Asian universities list, the young universities rankings, top 50 under employability rankings. The estimates that, currently, there are more than 40 global and regional fairly well in many. But the big news with the QS ranking this year was NTU beating NUS to be placed thit, while NUS fell three places to be ranked 18th. In the Reuter slit, though, NUS was ahead 27th, one place lower than last year, while NTU remained in the 81 top 90 and. The validity of these various rankings is often called into question

when universities make significant movements up or down the tables. This happened two years ago with the QS ranking, which saw both NUS and NTU Lap several Jalees into the top 13 in the world. NUS went up from 22 to 12, while NUTU's rise was even more dramatic – it went from 39 to 13, list one Jalee behind NUS. Their dramatic rise was in part due to a change in methodology on how research cliation was counted botto ta large wolms of cliabas of publications in fields such as the life ciences and medicine, compared with the arts and humanities. As a whole, the rankings are based on "bad social science", as academics haye pointed out. They use amix of subjective and objective data and some aspects, such as teaching quality, are asseed using rowy messures such as the ratio of academic staff to studems, and the makings, such as the European Commission SU-Multirank rankings worked a commercial purpose. In the early years, rankings would

appear as a supplement, boosting sales for the newspapers or magazines that carried them. This is still the case for rankings published by magazines or education consultancies, except education consultancies, except advertising online. Experts on university rankings such as DR richard Holmes, author of Watching The Bankings, have highlighted the 'prestigious events in spectacular settings' organised by ranking companies. Dr Holmes describes these events as 'alucitative mix of business opportunities' for ranking companies, which offer a slew orkshops for world class wannabes, And universities which workshops for world class wannabes, And universities which workshops for world class wannabes, and universities which companies, why for Kouttens of thousands of dollars for the privilege. In return, the hosts are showered with attention form the various media outlets covering the event, and as Dr Holmes points out, ranking companies have been fnown to recalibrate the weighting given to the indicators in their regional rankings, sometimes to the advantage of the university hosting the prestigious summit. He quotes the example of Times flighter E ducation's Asaten rankings nerosed weighting for research nerosed weighting for research nerosed weighting for research nerosed weighting for research he benefit of Hong Kong, where the Asian summit was held. Yet, despite tables when decoming summit was held.

positions, and some governme base funding decisions on the

Tainkings of their nome institutions, but what is working is the growing that what is workings to the rankings, and the second second second that, at their open houses, they have had students and parents guestioning them on their placings, singapore Management University surveyed students on their choice of universities. And what comes through clearly is their preference of universities. And what comes through clearly is their preference survey the students are used to the survey of the second students of the survey of the second students of the world considering an overseas education first look at how high a university ranks, instead of the correst of these comparisons to NTU president Bertil Andersson before. He noted that, prior to these international comparisons, the quality of education provided by universities was assumed. "Young universities like NTU may be making big improvements, but unnoticed So, thas been good for NTU, he argued. NUS provers Tan Eng Chye, whom ispoke to recently, admitten rankings had given it more visibility and helped to chart for to recend that the university's rise in the rankings had given it more visibility and helped to strate to pacademics and students.

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rankings of their home institutions But what is worrying is the growing reliance of students on the

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