

## BOOK REVIEW

**Sarjit Kaur, Morshidi Sirat and William G. Tierney, eds. *Quality Assurance and University Rankings in Higher Education in the Asia Pacific: Challenges for Universities and Nations*. Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia and National Higher Education Research Institute, 2010.**

In this increasingly borderless world, student enrolment in colleges, public and private universities have grown exponentially. Although this is a good sign, it has also raised concerns about the quality of teaching practices in higher education; the assessment of tertiary institutions; equity and access to higher education and the issue of international rankings and accreditation. Quality control has become a pressing concern more so now because of the transnational character of higher education. In view of this, since the 1990s, most countries have developed their own "quality assurance mechanisms," many of which were modelled after the Northern countries. However, the adoption of such mechanisms is not without problems, especially for countries in the South, as there are significant "socio-historical, economic, cultural and intra-nation power differentials" between them (Blanco-Ramirez and Berger 2013).

While quality practices are being relentlessly pursued in most countries, ironically, there are little attempts made to advance one's understanding or conceptualisation of quality (*ibid.*). More often than not, quality is often measured using international ranking systems which have often been utilised by many governments to make decisions on higher educational policies and allocation of resources. In this regard, policy makers and university heads aspire to rise up the global rankings as it will attract "investment in research and innovation and highly skilled mobile talent" (Hazelkorn 2011). Policies have also been initiated to develop "world-class universities" as this is seen as the "panacea for ensuring success in the global economy" (*ibid.*).

Given the above global scenario in higher education, this edited book, indeed, is timely, as it aims to provide a critical and engaging analysis of quality assurance and university rankings facing selected countries in the Asia Pacific region by global experts researching in the area of higher education. It also presents the various challenges and complexities faced by these developing economies as they grapple with the ranking systems offered by both the Times Higher Education Supplement (THES) and Shanghai Jiao Tong (SHJT) University as well as the initiatives undertaken

by higher education systems in the Asia Pacific region in working towards developing world-class universities.

This book, which is divided into two parts, has 10 chapters in all. The first part, comprising five chapters, offers global perspectives on quality assurance and university rankings while the second part, with an equal number of chapters, presents the challenges for universities and nations, their practices and practicalities. In the first chapter, Ying Cheng and Nian Cai Liu discuss the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) set up by the Graduate School of Education of Shanghai Jiao Tong (SHJT) University. It presents the ranking criteria and weights for ARWU as well as the definitions of the indicators of academic or research performance. The chapter also includes a discussion of the methodologies, features and limitations of ARWU. Based on the ARWU, the global performance and positionings of Asia Pacific universities are also analysed. Recommendations on how to improve the ranking system and how to wisely use it by stakeholders are also provided.

In the second chapter, Simon Marginson provides a critical and insightful analysis of the global knowledge economy and the culture of comparisons in higher education. In this regard, he discusses how knowledge flows are regulated in the k-economy by "league tables and other institutional and research rankings; publications and citation metrics; and journal hierarchies" (p. 31). It is these processes that provide the guiding tool for future investment in research and innovation and the means of global k-comparisons for most nations. He then discusses their implications for research universities in the global era and higher education systems in the Asia Pacific.

Subramaniam Venkatraman highlights, in the third chapter, the struggles faced by Asia Pacific countries in meeting the rising demand for higher education. This has resulted in the migration of students to established universities in developed economies. The latter are preferred as they are in a much more favourable position in terms of their global ranking. However, he argues that there are inherent deficiencies in the ranking system as it does not consider "measurable indicators of outcome and quality issues" (p. 78). He then suggests a list of alternative indicators that will provide a much more holistic picture of the quality and impact of higher education institutions.

In chapter four, William G. Tierney and Douglas Burleson point out the importance of cooperation and coordination among various stakeholders in sustaining viable graduate programmes. He also analyses three important components which affect the quality of graduate programmes, namely, faculty productivity, student productivity and the nature of their training.

Focus is also on the challenges facing graduate education and best practices in achieving quality.

Jane Knight offers, in chapter five, critical insights on the emergence of "second generation" or new developments in crossborder education activities, aptly termed as "educational hot spots," "educational gateway," "regional educational hubs," "university town," etc., in a number of Asia Pacific countries. As well, she discusses their rationales and implications for quality and sustainability. She asserts that the quality and integrity of crossborder education must not be compromised in the context of wanting to be "number one in the new knowledge enterprise" (p. 100).

The focus of the second part of the book is on practices and practicalities on quality assurance and university rankings. Ellen Hazelkorn begins with a comparative analysis of the attitudes and responses to rankings by higher education institutions in Germany, Australia and Japan. Issues that are focused on are institutional strategy and planning, benchmarking and quality assurance and student and faculty recruitment. Influence of rankings and how they help to shape policy initiatives are also dealt with in this chapter.

In the seventh chapter, Anthony Welch compares the status and research output of five ASEAN member countries (the Southeast Asia Five) and discusses the challenges and constraints they face in terms of their capacity for knowledge creation and innovation. He also assesses the various strategies that have been deployed to raise the quality of higher education which include efforts to boost university rankings.

Rui Yang adopts, in chapter eight, a case study approach to discuss quality assurance, university rankings and China's higher education. The author's focus is on a major Chinese university that is Wuhan University and the various initiatives and strategies adopted to raise standards and education quality in terms of programme restructuring, teaching, research and the university's efforts to internationalise higher education. Interestingly, the chapter juxtaposes the Chinese government's grand rhetoric with regard to quality assurance and the grim actuality of China's higher education. This helps to reflect the crisis in quality faced by China's higher education institutions.

In the ninth chapter, Sarjit Kaur and Morshidi Sirat chart the phenomenal growth of higher education in Malaysia, highlighting in the process the "aggressive strategies" deployed to enhance quality and to rise up the global rankings. They also point out the political leaders' "misplaced priorities" as their concern is much more about status and getting into the global ranking game rather than focusing on the weaknesses of the existing THES and SHJT ranking systems. In deliberating Malaysia's strategic

response to global challenges in the higher education sector, they unveil Malaysia's National Higher Education Strategic Plan and the Accelerated Programme for Excellence (APEX) whose main aims are to help transform Malaysia's higher education sector in order to achieve world class status. Efforts are also taken to discuss how Universiti Sains Malaysia, the appointed APEX University, addresses global issues in higher education for sustainable development. Implications of future challenges that will be encountered are also discussed.

The notion of quality higher education is closely examined in the tenth and last chapter. Paul T. J. James provides a detailed discussion of the meaning of quality in higher education from a variety of perspectives, factors that influence quality, quality assurance practices and standards, and the Thai government's strategic initiatives associated with the "development and application of quality management in Thai higher education" (p. 255). The chapter also assesses the effectiveness of the Thai university ranking system.

It is, indeed, a commendable effort on the editors' part to bring together in one volume a diversity of views and perspectives on quality assurance and university rankings in the Asia Pacific region. In this connection, pertinent issues in the area of higher education have come under close scrutiny. These include the issue of quality assurance, global-k economy and its implications for higher education systems, global and local ranking systems, building and sustaining graduate education programmes, cross border education activities, attitudes and responses to ranking, challenges and constraints in knowledge creation and innovation, initiatives to raise standards, challenges and implications of building world class universities, etc.

The discussions are engaging and useful as they provide some important revelations: quality of education is difficult to measure and that there are many deficiencies in existing measuring constructs or criteria; higher education sector is an uneven playing field as many Asia Pacific countries are handicapped because of lack of funding, limited resources and qualified human capital to compete with established universities; obsession with securing a place in the top 100 universities has resulted in universities in the Asia Pacific region to lose sight of their main mission that is to educate; the highly controlled and regulated higher education system in some Asia Pacific countries will hinder their pursuit of excellence; global ranking systems are biased towards institutions in English speaking countries and that there is a need to develop alternative ranking systems that are just, equitable and much more sustainable. Without any doubt, these

revelations will help to map out future research pathways or trajectories for scholars working in the area of higher education.

However, what is missing in this volume is a critical review of past scholarly research on quality assurance and university rankings especially in the Asia Pacific region. It is crucial for readers to know what has been investigated thus far and what were the research findings. An inclusion of this element in an introductory chapter would have helped to contextualise the volume apart from providing an avenue to discuss differing views and perspectives of "quality assurance," "university rankings" and, for that matter, the highly contested and complex notion of "quality." Admittedly, some chapters in this volume do discuss these notions but it would be prudent and meaningful to have included this discussion in an opening chapter, one that would have provided an important backdrop to the edited volume.

In addition, none of the chapters locate their discussion of tertiary education within the larger political context to critically examine whether say, a politically controlled or restrictive environment in countries in the Asia Pacific region has become an impediment to the building of an intellectual environment where debates and critical enquiries are robust in nature, and hence are able to attract more critical and quality students as well as academics not only from the host countries but also from elsewhere including the industrialised West. Besides, the degree of academic freedom, or lack of, would reflect the larger socio-political environment of the country concerned. A university autonomy, which to a large extent is vital to the dynamism of an educational institution, comes to mind. This is also to remind ourselves that, like many other things in life, politics does have an impact on education and, in turn, can affect the quality of graduates that emerge out of the education system who are poised to serve for the collective benefit of a particular country.

Another important issue that is not addressed by the volume is the commodification of higher education particularly via private institutions of higher learning. In certain cases, this gives rise to an unhealthy phenomenon whereby the universities concerned consciously promote or overemphasise technical courses at the expense of equally vital courses that are of theoretical nature but intellectually challenging nonetheless. Further, the deliberate pandering to the needs of the industry by certain universities to some extent may lead to the production of so-called "factory robots" and less of thinking graduates who have the capability to face problems and find appropriate solutions. In a sense, the quality of university education can also be adversely affected in this manner apart from problems of limited funding, lack of resources and qualified human capital.

This said, however, on the whole, this edited volume on higher education is a praiseworthy effort as the combination of macro and micro perspectives on quality assurance and university rankings will provide a useful contribution to the discipline and, as such, it will appeal to policy makers, university heads, academics, researchers, postgraduate students, etc.

## **REFERENCES**

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