


# University rankings distort SDGs



By [Dzulkifli Abdul Razak](#) - June 26, 2021 @ 12:06am

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Not too long ago, Malaysians were surprised by another league table exercise called "sugar daddy" (or "mummy") universities. This is another ranking that is commercially-driven, like the usual ones that used to crowd our minds and worked our obsessions.

It is global in its coverage, but this was the first time for Malaysia. From 2018 to 2019, the percentage involving universities has apparently increased significantly. More so due to the pandemic.

Many Malaysian universities, especially private ones, except for one, were well placed. The reactions, however, were mind boggling. Instead of the usual song and dance, there was hue and cry instead.

It is baffling to see such repulsion from those who have been pro-ranking all along. To the extent that there was a call to take action against the (sugar) sponsors. It points to the practice of cherry picking even in the choice of rankings. Why so is a matter of perception rather than principle.

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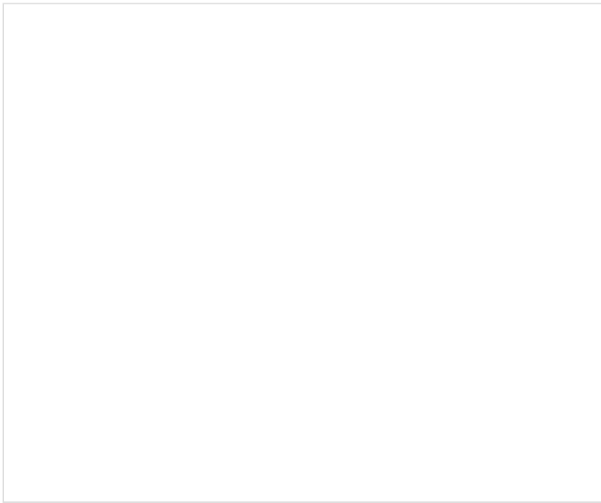
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In this case, it was alleged to be "distasteful" and "dehumanising", almost an issue of morality and ethics, some insisted. Is not the other rankings the same, equally "dehumanising" when humans are rendered and treated like "things" to be measured and given a number? Is it not equally "distasteful" in terms of morality and ethics?

What if "sugar daddy" universities are viewed in a different light and described in positive ways? For example, framing it as a philanthropic exercise where the donor provides financial support to a financially needy student wallowing in poverty and threatened by hunger or ill health.



What if we think of this with the first three of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), namely, no poverty, zero hunger and good health and wellbeing? Without addressing them, there will be many more dropouts. The assumption, of course, is that the "sugar parent" is just as honest and sincere as the other donors.

And why not? If there is evidence to the contrary, rest assured the donors are not all angels either. No need to cherry pick the so-called "rankers" that are well known for their business acumen and vested interests.

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No need for the hue and cry or the call for some rankings to be censored, while others that are equally manipulative and clandestine are not. And what is taking place is mostly unknown to the public, students and parents. To them, university rankings are real and authentic. No questions asked.

Regardless, many universities have had packages and offers extended to them in the name of quality enhancement (read: top ranking). It is part of the game and not unlike "sugaring" by the university to secure the appropriate level of "sweetness" for potential customers in the race to the top.

Be that as it may, more recently, we were again surprised by another form of ranking. Like in the "sugar daddy" listing, one university was named again. It was dubbed "the highest ranked private university in Malaysia".

No hue and cry this time, neither was there a call to ban the ranking. The difference in reactions is just phenomenal, although there is only one SDG that can be related to this case — SDG 11.

The university was claimed to be "one of the world's leading institution in this category dedicated to creating career and business opportunities, safe and affordable housing, and building resilient societies and economies".

What seems lacking is how the one goal connects to the other 16 SDGs to give a whole-institution transformation, if not whole-community transformation to be holistically impactful. Meeting only one SDG is inadequate for this purpose, in fact it is to the contrary

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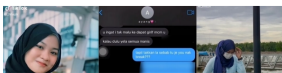
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For example, how are the urban poor (SDG 1) benefiting from the "affordable housing" or those with mental health issues (SDG 3) being helped in "building resilient societies", what more "economies" in terms of decent work and economic growth (SDG 8)?

It is similar for climate action (SDG 13), life on land (SDG 15) and below water (SDG 14), as are usually encountered in developing cities and commodities. In this sense, the "sugar daddy" ranking is better connected to other SDGs. After all, connecting the 17 goals collectively can transform the world for humanity under the Education 2030 Agenda. No less.

What about SDG 10, reduced inequalities, which is seen as the most important SDG? And SDG 16, peace, justice and strong institution, too. Without simultaneously addressing these two, the SDGs remain tentative if not temporary.

In other words, they are not "impactful", as the ranking alleged, especially in meeting challenges posed by the pandemic. Worse if the parties involved have a record of "unsustainable" action.

In summary, rankings aimed at trying to gauge impact in real terms are often deceiving when devoid of the "whole" approaches as advocated. It remains reductionist, and hence, unsustainable.

What is needed is interconnectedness in as many dimensions as possible toward the overarching 5P targets of the SDGs. Otherwise, the SDGs will continuously be distorted and the long-term impact shortchanged due to myopic outlooks and misunderstanding of SDGs.

The writer, an NST columnist for more than 20 years, is International Islamic University Malaysia rector


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