

# Optimism from World University Rankings 2022 hard to swallow



By [Dzulkifli Abdul Razak](#) - November 25, 2021 @ 12:16am

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The ranking game is back. Business-as-usual (pun intended), never mind the pandemic, according to the ranker, "BS" (not the real designation) when releasing the World University Rankings 2022 recently.

From some 1,300 universities in almost 100 locations globally that were surveyed, more than 20 Malaysian universities made it into the "BS" World University Rankings 2022 with Universiti Malaya (UM) ranking the topmost in the country.








Reportedly, five Malaysian universities improved their rankings compared with last year's rankings, mostly the private ones, in the 300 and 400 positions or more. However, only two made it to the top 100. The rest are public universities. Within the 200 placings, only six private universities cut it. Two of them belonged to government-linked companies (GLCs).

Two others dropped in their ranking compared with last year. In any case, we must thank the ranking exercise for putting the record straight as to the "quality" among the various universities in the country. Cynics, take

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In this regard, the ranker wasted no time in pronouncing "optimism for Malaysia's future in terms of higher education". It continues to commend Malay-sian universities on "the extraordinary progress they have made over the last five years". It cited that as recently as 2018, UM was not a top-100 university but it has "now firmly established itself among the 100 best universities in the world".

It must be specified, however, that the context is framed by a handful of indicators as previously defined by BS. This is to allow it to make "objective" comparisons as stated above. The downside is that even in a short period, the situations have changed drastically as dictated by the Covid-19 pandemic. To say that it is comparable is an overstatement.

In 2021, the pandemic became more devastating, not only in terms of death and spread, but also in terms of lockdowns and closures of campuses. Let alone movements of students and staff in all universities, public and private.

To have an "extraordinary progress" is hard to compute if the pandemic is to be factored in. Especially when universities within the 200 bracket had better numbers against their names despite the raging pandemic. One can be at best "cautiously" optimistic in contrast to what BS wants us to believe.

The reason for this is made doubly clear by best-selling author Peter Fleming, a professor of Organisation Studies, in his book, *Dark Academia: How universities die* (Pluto, 2021), released earlier this year.

Based on experiences in developed countries, he explored the dark side of modern universities to reveal cracks in the ivory tower, arguing that there is "a strong link between the neoliberalisation of higher education over the last 20 years and the psychological hell now endured by its staff and students".

While academia was once considered the best job in the world — one that fosters autonomy, craft, intrinsic job satisfaction and vocational zeal — he alleged that one would be hard-pressed to find a lecturer who believes that now. Remarkably, this observation resonates well with many more



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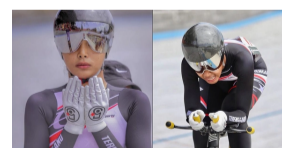
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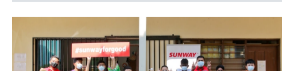
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These are in stark contrast to the "optimism" expressed by BS, especially in relation to employers and students' employability. The fact remains that employability is on a downward spiral like never before. This cannot be ignored!

Here, Fleming is more instructive when he delved into the "overly hierarchical world to bring out the hidden underbelly of the neoliberal university", the new metrics-obsession (read: ranking), commercialisation, the rise of managerialism, students as consumers, the market (competitive) individualism leading "societal contradiction" and the "edu-factory logic" that BS seems to be oblivious about.

As Fleming aptly noted, all these are beyond the brochures of smiling students, and lingering misconceptions of intellectual life in the ivory tower. He recognises that time has almost run out to reverse this decline to fix the broken system.

A far cry from what BS is trying to persuade the universities, especially the gullible ones, continue playing the ranking game.

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



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