

Column for Manila Bulletin
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Of Trees and Forest

Competitive Culture

MANILA, Philippines — I share the disappointment of our leading universities over the drop in their global rankings. No Philippine university made it to the top 300 list in the World University Rankings 2011 released last month by London-based Quacquarelli Symonds Ltd.

In the latest QS university rankings, the University of the Philippines, the only SUC (state universities and colleges) included in the QS world universities ranking, dropped 18 notches to 332nd this year from 314th last year.

The top private universities, all run by religious orders, did not fare better. Ateneo de Manila University fell to 360th place from 307th last year.

De La Salle University dropped from the 451-500 bracket last year to the 551-600 bracket this year, while the University of Santo Tomas fell out of the Top 600 universities to the 601+ bracket this year.

QS evaluates universities around the world based on indicators like academic peer review, citations per faculty member, number of international students and faculty and student-faculty ratio. And QS also looks at the universities' performance in teaching five key subject areas: arts and humanities, engineering and information technology, life sciences and biomedicine, natural sciences, and social sciences.

Not surprisingly, the results of this year's rankings were met with some criticism, such as the results not being accurate or that universities were given different sets of questions or even that the institutions were not given enough time to prepare for the surveys.

I also understand the concerns raised by student leaders from UP (my alma mater) and other SUCs, that the drop in UP's ranking and the failure of other SUCs to get into the QS rankings was due to the decline in budgetary support, which has been estimated at P500 million for all SUCs in the proposed budget for 2012.

A member of the QS advisory board was quoted in media reports as saying the results of the 2011 rankings clearly illustrated the link between investment in education and the performance of educational institutions.

According to QS, countries that reduced funding for higher education generally see a decline in the global standings of their universities.

So it is not surprising that many of the top universities are those from developed economies, where funding is not a big problem.

Topping the list was the University of Cambridge (UK), followed by Harvard University (US), Massachusetts Institute of Technology (US), Yale University (US), and Oxford University (UK). Only two universities from Asia are on the Top 25 – the University of Hong Kong (No. 22) and the University of Tokyo (No. 25).

But I was disappointed when I learned that one of the local universities was considering withdrawing from the annual rankings because of QS's failure to provide prior notice before changing its criteria.

That reaction, to me, is defeatist. This should not be our attitude, especially of our educators, when we are confronted by challenges. That's what I call the results of the QS rankings – a challenge.

Instead of withdrawing, our universities should examine the factors behind the decline in their rankings and work hard to improve their performance – and their rankings – when the next round of competition comes.

That's what QS is, a global competition. And the right attitude toward any competition is to compete. That is what I tell the people in my companies when we are confronted with competitors that are seemingly bigger, more aggressive, and with more resources. We compete, regardless of the odds against us.

Outside the academe, we should be competitive. We are already recognized as a world leader in the business process outsourcing sector; we are No. 2 in developing renewable energy sources; we have barely tapped our mineral resources, considered the fifth most rich in the world; and our workers are the most sought-after in the labor markets.

In fact, we are gaining recognition in many other endeavors. We have the world's best boxer, an award-winning Broadway actress, and, more recently, one of the most beautiful women in the world.

I call it the competitive culture, which should be developed not only in our educational system but in all facets of national life. The whole world is one big arena where every nation competes. Don't even think about where the laggards lie.

To our educators, may I refer them to the lecture of one of America's foremost exponent in pursuit of higher and better education, Professor William G. Bowen, President of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, during the Thomas Jefferson Foundation Distinguished Lecture Series held at the University of Virginia on 06 April 2004.

Prof. Bowen extensively lectured on the theme dwelling on the dual claims of excellence and equity in the shaping of American higher education that serves as complements or as competition with one another. The lecture series was eventually printed under the heading "In Pursuit Of Excellence."

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