

INTERNATIONAL



ENGINEERING GRADUATE STUDENT
AT BRAIN SCIENCE RESEARCH CENTER,
KOREA ADVANCED INSTITUTE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

STORYONG I FF. BLACK STAR

Magazine's Rankings of Asian Universities Are Popular With Readers, Not Academics

U. of Tokyo, ranked No. 1 for past two years, refuses to participate in 'Asiaweek' evaluations

BY DAVID COHEN

WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND
IT HAS BEEN nearly 20 years since Cesar Bacani, a senior editor at *Asiaweek* magazine, graduated from the University of the Philippines. Yet now hardly a working day passes without him thinking of his alma mater.

"I receive many reminders on the subject," he says dryly, "not all of them very happy-sounding."

The University of the Philippines is one of the 79 universities to have been ranked—at No. 32, not highly enough, in the view of some of Mr. Bacani's correspondents—in *Asiaweek's* latest annual survey of the "best" higher-education institutions in Asia. Mr. Bacani is in charge of the project, which is attracting increased attention—and scrutiny.

As in previous surveys, Japanese universities lead this year's rankings of "multidisciplinary" institutions. (The magazine rates science and technology institutes separately.) The strongest gains in 1999 were posted by South Korean institutions, with Seoul National University moving up three notches to third place, and Yonsei University making its first appearance in the top 10. Other institutions in that leading group were in Australia, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan.

But part of the story of this year's rank-

ings concerns the universities that opted out of the survey—not only in mainland China, where 19 institutions declined to participate (see story on Page A52), but also the University of Tokyo, which was ranked No. 1 in each of the two preceding years.

In a letter to the Hong Kong-based magazine, the University of Tokyo's new president, Hasumi Shigehiko, argued that the education and research at his institution "cannot be compared with that of other universities. . . . Such characteristics are profoundly individual and extremely difficult to quantify." His position on the matter, he added, "will not waver as long as I am president."

Christopher Tremewan, a pro-vice-chancellor, or vice-president, at the University of Auckland, in New Zealand, says *Asiaweek* is treading a thin line. "The mag-

"The magazine has to be careful that the inadequacy of its methodology doesn't drive more and more universities away from the survey."

azine has to be careful that the inadequacy of its methodology doesn't drive more and more universities away from the survey," he says.

Like other periodicals that publish similar rankings—including *U.S. News & World Report*, *Maclean's* in Canada, and Britain's *Financial Times*—*Asiaweek* aims to measure the academic excellence of universities by quantifying their achievements. Mr. Bacani says the magazine's role is in "objectifying the myths . . . substantiating or debunking the idea that such-and-such a university is the best, simply because that's what people have always claimed."

A DAUNTING CHALLENGE

When *Asiaweek* decided to publish a ranking of universities, in 1997, the task appeared to be straightforward enough. After all, other periodicals already had done it, and the magazine even had some previous experience of its own—several years earlier, it had published a guide to 34 of Asia's leading higher-education institutions. While that survey included degree offerings and student fees, it did not attempt to rank the institutions.

But the challenge of developing the ranking system proved daunting—espe-

Continued on Following Page

INTERNATIONAL

DH19990029E

Continued From Preceding Page

cially in such a vast region that accounts for more than half the world's population, spread out, for the purposes of the survey, across 18 countries and territories. The survey also took in the South Pacific nations of Australia and New Zealand.

Geography, notes Mr. Bacani, was only "the most obvious" challenge. "In Asia, you also have the cultural matters of saving face, of institutional and national prestige," he says. "Remember that this was the first time anything like this had been tried in Asia."

For those and other reasons, he says, "when we began working on the first survey, no one took it entirely seriously."

In 1997, five-page questionnaires were sent to just 78 universities, requesting information on fees, student-teacher ratios, salary levels, and faculty qualifications, and asking officials to evaluate the reputations of other institutions being surveyed. In the subsequent ranking of 50 institutions, no distinction was made between multidisciplinary universities and science and technology institutes, thus opening the magazine to accusations that it was comparing apples with oranges.

FIVE CATEGORIES

This year's survey was based on an expanded eight-page questionnaire, which included new questions on subjects such as Internet access. It was sent to 149 universities, 95 of which submitted complete responses. Universities were judged in five categories: academic reputation, student selectivity, faculty resources, research output, and financial resources.

As in the two earlier surveys, Mr. Bacani developed the criteria, organized the data, and, working with four research assistants and *Asiaweek's* network of correspondents, compiled the rankings. For the first time, the magazine this year ranked science and technology institutes separate from multidisciplinary universities.

'Asiaweek' Ranks the Region's Top Universities

Major Multidisciplinary Institutions

1. Tohoku U. (Japan)
2. Kyoto U. (Japan)
3. Seoul National U. (South Korea)
4. U. of Hong Kong
5. National Taiwan U.*
6. National U. of Singapore
7. Chinese U. of Hong Kong
8. U. of New South Wales (Australia)
9. Yonsei U. (South Korea)
10. U. of Melbourne (Australia)

Science and Technology Institutes

1. Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (South Korea)
2. Pohang U. of Science and Technology (South Korea)
3. Tokyo Institute of Technology
4. Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi
5. Indian Institute of Technology, Madras
6. Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay
7. Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur
8. Nanyang Technological U. (Singapore)
9. U. of Science and Technology of China
10. National Taiwan U. of Science and Technology*

* *Asiaweek* chose to omit "National" from the names of universities in mainland China and Taiwan.



The expanded effort, however, has not satisfied the concerns about the magazine's research. Even officials at the National University of Singapore, which consistently has been ranked among the top six institutions, have found aspects of the methodology wanting. Hang Chang Chieh, the university's deputy vice-chancellor, complains that he has "no idea" how *Asiaweek* could rate his institution 64th in terms of faculty resources after it was in the top 10 in that category one year ago.

"Universities do not change this quickly, which is why any assessment of this

type needs to take a complex approach," says Mr. Hang. He believes the magazine might do better to conduct its surveys and compile its rankings less often, perhaps "once every five years."

For some institutions in Australia and New Zealand, another sticking point has been the survey's selectivity criterion, which accounts for a quarter of each institution's overall score. The selectivity score is based in part on the number of first-year students accepted compared with the total number of applicants.

In New Zealand, for example, about 25

per cent of all first-time students enrolled at the country's seven national universities are over 21 years old, and by law they are exempt from an entrance examination for general degree programs; the institutions cannot deny them admission. "Selectivity simply cannot be compared across different jurisdictions," says Mr. Tremewan, of the University of Auckland.

"Let's face it," says José Y. Dalisay, Jr., an associate professor of English at the University of the Philippines. "no Philippine university is ever going to even come close to, say, Japanese and Australian universities, in terms of faculty salaries and facilities. But in terms of value for money—including imponderable values such as a sense of service to one's own homeland and institution—we deliver more than these rankings would imply."

A 'SPURIOUS' CONCEPT

Kyong soo Lho, a professor of international politics at Seoul National University, disagrees. While describing the concept of news media-created university rankings as "spurious," he acknowledges that the *Asiaweek* survey comes at a time when the globalization of higher education is forcing Asian universities, including his own, to prove themselves worthy of the rankings that are bestowed on them. "Whether individual countries like it or not," he says, "somebody is going to do these things, especially if we are going to make this region truly competitive."

Issues of nationalism touch on an implicit feature of the *Asiaweek* rankings, compiled as they are in a region where private institutions almost universally exist in the financial shadows of their state-supported counterparts. The relative wealth of governments, and the portion of the treasury they are prepared to spend on higher education, is the survey's "silent factor," in the words of one Indonesian academic.

In part, *Asiaweek* has attempted to get around the issue of relative national wealth

by converting all money figures into "purchasing power parity," or P.P.P., which makes numbers comparable by taking into account price differences in each country. Even so, Mr. Bacani acknowledges, the top universities tend to be in countries that also lead in gross domestic product.

'PRESSING GOVERNMENTS FOR FUNDING'

At the same time, the survey is widely seen, both by the magazine and many academics, as a potentially useful tool in the annual scramble for public funds that takes place in most of the region's nations. Government officials of at least one country—the Philippines—have even approached the magazine for additional information on higher education, in order to assist them in making this year's budget decisions.

"These rankings are extremely good for universities at the top, in terms of pressing governments for funding," says Chris Fell, a deputy vice-chancellor at the University of New South Wales, in Australia. "This is where the comparison they offer is proving particularly helpful."

The survey also offers countries in the region a sense of their collective financial fortunes, a useful service in a part of the world only now emerging from nearly two years of unprecedented economic turmoil. Among the reassuring facts in this year's report on the rankings: The combined budgets of the universities in the top 65 places in 1998 was \$15-billion, up from \$13.7-billion in 1997, when the economic crisis struck.

A POPULAR FEATURE

Among readers, the rankings have only grown in popularity. Last month, in the week following the appearance of this year's rankings in *Asiaweek*, the pages on the magazine's World-Wide Web site (<http://www.asiaweek.com>) devoted to the survey received a record number of "hits," or viewings—more than 290,000. The annual "best universities" issue is one of the year's biggest sellers for the magazine, which is published by Time Inc.

Evidence of the survey's attention-getting power can be found in almost any of the countries represented in the listings. Visitors to public-relations offices on campuses in Singapore and Malaysia, for ex-

ample, will typically be offered reprints of the magazine's rankings, complete with the flattering institutional profiles of the top universities. In Indonesia and South Korea, newspaper editorials regularly cite the survey when they seek to celebrate—or to chide—their countries' higher-education standards.

Even here in New Zealand, an institution such as Victoria University, in Wellington—No. 68 this year, down from 38 last year—has chosen to include the improvement of its *Asiaweek* ranking among its "top strategic goals" for the coming

decade, according to the university's most recent annual report.

The survey's ubiquity has been made clear to university officials across the Asia-Pacific region. "It has acquired a very high credibility, not just among academics but also students, who nowadays often come along to our overseas recruitment offices clutching copies of the magazine," says Mr. Fell, of the University of New South Wales.

In the end, though, Mr. Bacani believes the most important service his magazine's rankings may be providing is a "wake-up

call" to higher education, and not just in Asia and the Pacific.

"In the past," he says, "the attitude of Asian universities has been, 'We're No. 1 in our country, and that's good enough.' But that's not good enough anymore—and the attitude is really changing."

"Many more students are now staying in Asia for their education, rather than going to the United States or Europe. The economic crisis has had something to do with that. But it's also happening because Asian universities are becoming world class, which is what the rankings are all about." ■

DH19990029E3