The Times Higher Education World University Rankings compare apples and pears

The newly released 2021 Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings carry few surprises. The usual contestants lead the rankings. Yet among them are some institutions which should never be found near the top. If Kim Jong-un spent a fortune on Pyongyang University, would you really trust a university ranking led by a North Korean “university?”

Could it be for good reason that the motto of Harvard University is “veritas” (Latin for “verity,” or “truth”) or that the motto of Stanford University is “Die Luft der Freiheit weht” (German for “the wind of freedom blows”)? Academic freedom in the quest for truth is the very foundation of a university. But in some countries, academic freedom is non-existent.

Take, for example, the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Fudan University is regularly found near the top of world university rankings. In late 2019 its charter was revised to remove “freedom of thought,” and the word “independently” was dropped from sentences describing the running of the university and the conduct of academic studies. Inserted was “the comprehensive leadership of the Communist Party.” Student spies reporting on their professors has become common practice across PRC campuses, as has the dismissal of politically inconvenient faculty.

Contrast this with a vast literature on academia that goes back centuries. Robert M. Hutchins in a speech titled “What Is a University?,” given in 1935 as President of the University of Chicago, stated that a university cannot exist without freedom of enquiry, freedom of discussion, and freedom of teaching. Replacing “freedom of thought” by the “comprehensive leadership of the Communist Party” is nothing but a public declaration that this institution has abdicated its right to be included in a university ranking.

Or take Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, tenured professors are fired for political reasons, and criticism of the “central government,” if interpreted by agents of the regime as “undermining the authority of the central government,” will nowadays be rewarded with imprisonment. Contrast this with New Zealand law that lists assigns to universities, among others, “the role of critic and conscience of society.” The THE World University Rankings want you to believe that five Hong Kong institutions of higher education are better than the best university in New Zealand.

Adjusting the THE World University Rankings for academic freedom is difficult. A scientific study of academic freedom in Europe concludes with a ranking of 28 European countries (with the UK in 27th place). A worldwide country ranking by academic freedom is not available.

In the US, academic freedom derives from the First Amendment on free speech, and so does freedom of the press. This suggests using freedom of the press as a proxy for academic freedom. Reporters without Borders compiles a World Press Freedom Index covering 180 nations.

Dividing the THE World University Rankings overall score by the Press Freedom global score yields a university score adjusted for academic freedom. In the unadjusted THE World University Rankings, mainland Chinese universities rank 20, 23, 70, 87, 94, 100, and 111.
among the top 150 universities. In the adjusted rankings—covering the original top 150 universities—all seven end up at the bottom, on ranks 144-150. Hong Kong universities slide from ranks 39, 56 (two Hong Kong universities), 126 and 129 to ranks 132 and 138-141; that is with a Press Freedom Index predating the imposition of the so-called National Security Law on 30 June 2020. Singapore’s two universities drop from 25th and 47th to 142nd and 143rd place.

The adjustment also leads to a wider reshuffling at the top. The UK and the US don’t do all that well when it comes to freedom of the press. Many European countries enjoy a substantially higher degree of freedom of the press. That shows in the adjusted THE World University Rankings.

In the unadjusted rankings, UK and US universities account for 32 of the top 50 slots. In the adjusted rankings, two UK universities make it into the top 50 while none of the US universities do (which, however, follow, en masse, right behind). Switzerland now leads the pack, followed by the Nordic countries, the Netherlands, Germany, the remainder of Continental Europe, and Canada. (Figure 1 shows the shift.)

One may question if freedom of the press is a reliable proxy for academic freedom. The fact that the UK ranks 27th out of 28 European countries in academic freedom suggests that it is.

Treating academic freedom— the very foundation of a university—as irrelevant rewards totalitarian regimes for their transformation of academia into a strictly controlled factory system targeting regime-desired technological advances (and propaganda). The humanities and social sciences become a soulless wasteland. Human values make way for obedience to the Great Leader. A body of castrated pseudo-academics shapes research fields worldwide as journal editors, reviewers, and article authors. And the THE World University Rankings can declare that institutions built on strict obedience to the Communist Party and devoid of freedom of thought constitute great universities.

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Adjusted THE World University Rankings 2021 = (Original) THE World University Rankings 2021 “Overall Score” divided by 2020 World Press Freedom “(Global) Score.” A higher value is better.


Figure 1. Adjusted Vs. Unadjusted THE World University Rankings 2021