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University Rankings: Comparing Apples and Pears

Institutions of Higher Education without academic freedom have no place in university rankings

The newly released [2021 Times Higher Education \(THE\) World University Rankings](#) carry few surprises. The usual contestants lead the rankings. Yet some of the institutions found near the top raise eyebrows. If Pyongyang University of Science & Technology had unlimited resources that allowed it to tick all of the THE's boxes and make it into the top ranks, would you send your children to North Korea for their higher education?

Could it be for good reason that the [motto of Harvard University](#) is “veritas” (Latin for “verity,” or “truth”) and that [of Stanford University](#) “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 in Shanghai ranks highly in 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 members](#).

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 a public declaration that this institution has abdicated its right to be considered a *university*.

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 assigns to universities, among others, “the role of critic and conscience of society.”

It is high time to stop treating academic freedom—the very foundation of a university—as little other than an irrelevant ornament. But adjusting the THE World University Rankings for academic freedom is difficult.

The [‘Varieties of Democracy’ \(V-Dem\) project](#) at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden has now for the first time incorporated a total of five indicators of academic freedom in their database (for 1900 through 2019). These five indicators have allowed researchers to construct a rudimentary [academic freedom index](#) across countries.

Adjusting the THE World University Rankings for academic freedom (by multiplying the THE score with the academic freedom index value) reveals an astounding pattern. While

most universities exhibit an almost one-to-one correspondence between their ranks in the unadjusted and the adjusted THE World University Rankings (Figure 1), a single set of universities stands out. Focusing on the top 150 universities in the original THE World University Rankings, the seven mainland Chinese universities plunge from ranks 20, 23, 70, 87, 94, 100, and 111 to the very bottom of the list. All five Hong Kong universities and both Singapore universities, the highest of these originally ranked 25th and 39th, end up in 137th to 143rd place, just above the seven mainland Chinese institutions.

Alternatively, consider press freedom as a proxy for academic freedom. In the US, academic freedom derives from the First Amendment on free speech, and so does freedom of the press. While not identical, academic freedom and freedom of the press go hand in hand. Reporters without Borders compiles a [World Press Freedom Index](#) covering 180 nations.

The results are virtually the same (Figure 2). The mainland Chinese universities tumble to the very bottom of the list, immediately preceded by the Hong Kong and Singapore universities (with one of the latter universities, the University of Hong Kong, ranking slightly higher, in 132nd place). Additionally, adjusting by press freedom favors Continental European universities over UK and US universities because press freedom is significantly higher in countries such as Switzerland, the Netherlands and Germany than in the UK and the US.

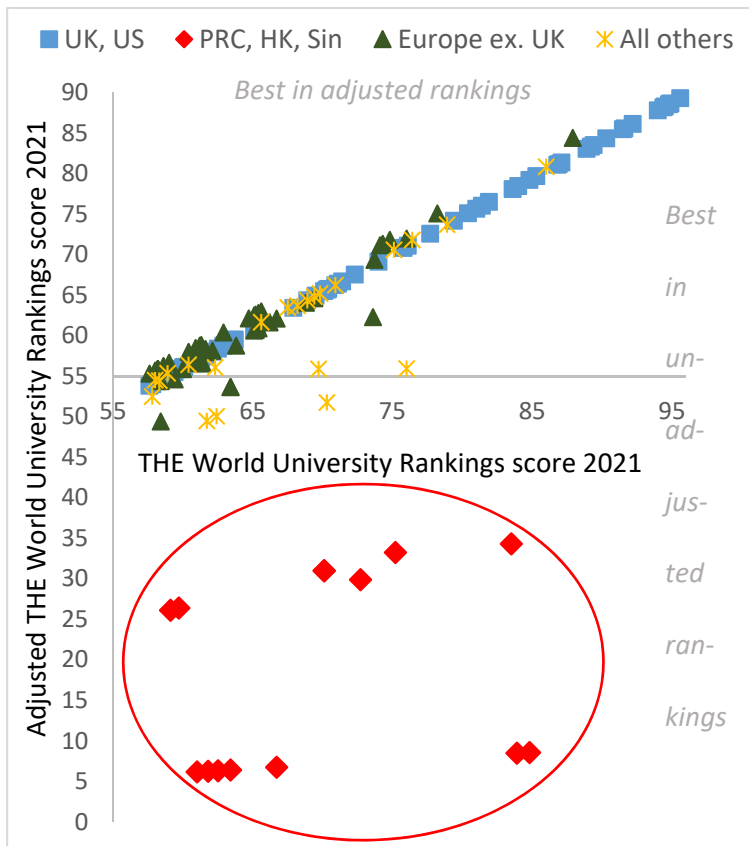
Is press freedom a reliable proxy for academic freedom? The fact that a [scientific study of academic freedom across 28 European countries](#) ranks the UK 27th suggests that it is. And the PRC's 177th rank in press freedom, surpassing only Eritrea, Turkmenistan, and North Korea, matches what we know about academic freedom in the PRC.

University rankings such as the THE World University Rankings reward totalitarian regimes for their transformation of academia into a strictly controlled factory system targeting regime-desired technological advances. 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 institutions built on strict obedience to the Communist Party in a world devoid of freedom of thought constitute great universities.

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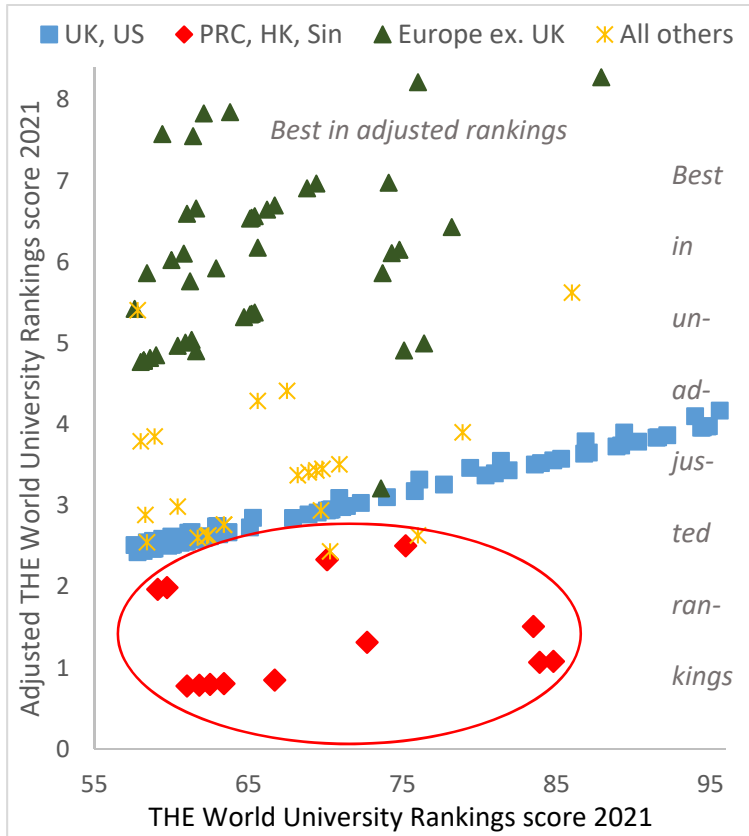


UK: United Kingdom; US: United States; PRC: People’s Republic of China (excluding Hong Kong); HK: Hong Kong; Sin: Singapore.

Adjusted THE World University Rankings 2021 = (Original) THE World University Rankings 2021 “Overall Score” (which ranges from 0 to 100) times the Academic Freedom Index value (which ranges from 0 to 1). A higher value is better. The missing Academic Freedom Index values for the US and Australia are assumed to be equal to that of the UK, and the missing value of Switzerland is assumed to be equal to that of Germany. THE World University Rankings 2021 are officially compiled from 2019 and 2020 data; the Academic Freedom Index values are of 2019.

Sources: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2021/world-ranking#!/>, <https://www.gppi.net/project/assessing-academic-freedom-worldwide>.

Figure 1. Adjusted THE World University Rankings 2021 Based on Academic Freedom Index



See notes from previous figure.

Adjusted THE World University Rankings 2021 = (Original) THE World University Rankings 2021 “Overall Score” divided by the 2020 World Press Freedom “(Global) Score” (which ranges from the best score in the teens to the worst score in the eighties). A higher value is better.

Sources: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2021/world-ranking#!/>, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>.

Figure 2. Adjusted THE World University Rankings 2021 Based on Press Freedom