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Institutions of Higher Education without Academic Freedom Have No Place in University Rankings

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Academic freedom plays little or no role in university rankings yet makes all the difference between a thriving academia and a regime-controlled factory of higher education. Adjusting a well-known university ranking for academic freedom easily shakes out “top” universities under totalitarian regimes. If our values are worth more than lip service, then the current system of university rankings is in urgent need of reform.

The newly released 2021 Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings carry few surprises. The usual contestants lead the rankings. Yet among these are some institutions, operating under totalitarian regimes, that do not match our expectation of what universities are about. If one adjusts the top 150 universities in the THE World University Rankings for academic freedom, those from the People’s Republic of China (PRC, including Hong Kong) and from Singapore drop to the bottom of the list.

The Core Values of Our Universities

Current university rankings gloss over that which we value most: free academic discourse. In some countries, academic freedom is non-existent. Take, for example, the 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 our understanding of the role of academic freedom in academia, as expressed by Philip Altbach in 2001: “Academic freedom is at the very core of the mission of the university. It is essential to teaching and research. Many would argue that a fully developed higher education system cannot exist without academic freedom.”

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 lead to imprisonment. Contrast this with New Zealand law that assigns to universities, among others, “the role of critic and conscience of society.”

Adjusting University Rankings for Academic Freedom

It is high time to stop treating academic freedom—the very foundation of a university—as an irrelevant ornament of academia. 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 (Figure 1). While most universities exhibit an almost one-to-one correspondence between their ranks in...
the unadjusted and the adjusted THE World University Rankings, 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 Singapore and Hong Kong 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.

**Academic Freedom in the Age of STEM and Extreme Managerialism**

In the author’s home institution, the Hong Kong University of Science & Technology (HKUST), faculty members in the “STEM” fields (sciences, technology, engineering and mathematics) see little need for academic freedom. Predominantly mainland Chinese scholars in these fields chastise colleagues in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences for research that could, just possibly, attract unwelcome attention from the regime, to the point where colleagues leave.

Many of these mainland faculty will be Chinese Communist Party members whose membership oath includes, among others, to “carry out the Party's decisions, strictly observe Party discipline, guard Party secrets, and be loyal to the Party.” Party allegiance trumps everything, including academic freedom.

It doesn’t help when the institution has taken managerialism to an extreme, from the absence of meaningful faculty participation in academic matters to a passive, management-controlled “Senate” and the lack of a labor union. The PRC model of higher education represents a focus on STEM under factory-like arrangements controlled by management / the Party. Under such a system, there is no room for freedom of thought about society, the economy, let alone the polity or history. The truth is owned by the Party.

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; and “the purpose of education is not to fill the minds of students with facts; it is not to reform them, or amuse them, or make them expert technicians in any field. It is to teach them to think, if that is possible, and to think always for themselves.” Under a totalitarian regime there is no freedom of enquiry, no freedom of discussion, no freedom of teaching, and no learning to think for oneself.

Replacing “freedom of thought” by the “comprehensive leadership of the Communist Party” and replacing the quest for truth by Party “truth” constitutes nothing less than a public declaration that this institution has abdicated its right to be considered a university. Then why is it still included in university rankings?
The Consequences of Ignoring Academic Freedom in University Rankings

It is 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. The comprehensive leadership of the Communist Party and its monopoly on truth is its very antithesis.

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, with the humanities and social sciences reduced to 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.
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.


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.


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