Abstract

Strength of higher education system of any country is not easy to quantify precisely, nonetheless possession of prestigious universities and their alignment in the international academic comity signifies clearly the supremacy of their system. Search for quality in this competitive knowledge based economy is more intense than ever in the past. As such and due to enhanced information connectivity and accessibility, ranking of the universities has received more prominence and consulted more frequently for a variety of factors, though it never remains the sole factor in decision making. The paper describes the nature, benefits and needs of ranking system especially with reference to improved quality of education and learning, as well as serving the demands of student community, parents, employers, governments and media among others. It also narrates the criticism ranking process receives and the negative impacts it forecast due to its exploitation for other gains. Ranking of universities is viewed by the developing countries from a different angel. The experience and lessons learnt by the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in introducing ranking system in Islamic countries are, therefore, described with more details to comprehend more precisely the attitudes towards acceptance of such ranking systems by government authorities, universities and all other concerned.

Introduction

Education is a means for social development, empowerment and advancing of the general well-being and economic development of societies. It ensures the creation, accumulation and sharing of knowledge and building intellectual capital. Provision of quality education has always remained one of the top priorities of any national planning process for developing of a socially advanced, culturally sound and economically viable society. In this era of technological innovation and competitive knowledge-based economy, importance of higher education has emerged more significantly then ever and it is taken as inevitable ingredient for economic progress rather than a tool for social development. In order to fulfill huge demands of skilled professionals such as managers, doctors, engineers, scientists, lawyers, technocrats etc. to master new economic and technological competency at international level, strengthening of higher education system and its internationalization is becoming essential component of national development goals. As a result, most countries, even if their capacities to fulfill their needs differ widely, have set goals to broaden access to higher education and paying more attention to improve quality of education through quality assurance and accreditation-so as to compete at international level.
In order to fully embrace science, technology and innovation (STI), the economy needs a functional system comprising of educational institutions and scientific entities to generate new knowledge and innovate technologies so as to device necessary tools to increase the efficiency of production and services. In this process the need to expand and strengthen universities infrastructure and their competencies to impart quality education and promote research and innovation has increased tremendously. Further, over past couple of decades, due to the increased mobility of students and teachers internationalization has assumed much greater importance. The universities, whether they are in developed or in developing countries, they are becoming a part of global structure and their international outlook is becoming a prime factor for their recognition and acceptance. Possession of prestigious universities and their alignment in the international academic comity always signifies the supremacy of their system. In fact, the size and strength of higher education systems is determined by possession of world class universities which are considered more powerful asset for a nation then possession of weapon of mass destruction. As such, universities pay more attention to improve on aspect which can give the better academic ranking at international level.

Ranking is usually provided by Independent Professional Bodies, Government Agencies, Media, Accrediting Bodies as well as Funding Organizations. Academic Ranking of World Universities at international level are compiled, mainly by the Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and Times Higher Education, whereas a number of regional, computer based ranking processes are also working. A number of countries also compile ranking at national level too. The ranking are of diverse nature and mostly far from homogeneity. They differ significantly in terms of their stated purpose, the criteria and indicators that are used for evaluation, the mechanism and procedures.

**Healthy Competition:**

Ranking of universities definitely introduce a healthy competition which serves as self-improvement tools for universities and other higher educational institutions as it provide them incentives to improvements of their performances and learning from each other experiences, which is more important in improving the quality than any other internal factor. It enables the universities to judge their strengths, bridge up gaps, work on their assets and opportunities. A university motivated to improve their position in the ranking always make extra effort to inculcate quality and motivate staff and student to deliver better. In recent past most of the universities in the South were functioning is isolation and were oblivion of such a need so they never paid any attention to create any quality assurance and accreditation office or even felt necessity to improve on factors which were vital for improving their international standings. Even no links were maintained with departed graduated students, nor research outputs were properly recorded and neither links were established to incorporate international perspective. Impact of ranking on universities was quite obvious in case where a little improvement of systems influenced significant in improving the standard thus placing the universities on higher position in first attempt. Some universities, conscious of ranking, recently open their doors to foreign student and faculty, which added enormously revenues to improve their infrastructures and facilities.

Ranking also provide a useful instrument for public accountability, supplying information to consumers and policymakers on capacities in terms of higher education which in turn helps in assessing the measurable differences in service quality and taking right decision in improving their academic standards. Since universities are the engines driving national growth, alleviation of academic standards and position in international ranking impact on improving the quality of higher education system.
Setting Hierarchies

It is human nature to evaluate everything in perspective of others. This automatically creates hierarchies which allows to recognize strengthen and weaknesses of group and align them to work together in close proximity. These type of hierarchies always existed in social structures since beginning of human history. Ranking of universities is somewhat taken up as setting up of hierarchies, to place them in their right position to allow them to act appropriately in accordance with their positions. The idea of evaluating universities and constructing a relative hierarchy of universities was never appreciated among university leaders and professors. However, it was fatal when it is appears as dominance hierarchies where certain members dominates permanently over others, enforce their supremacy, their position and standards as the best standards that there is competition for resources, so as to claim access to better resources and opportunities. Universities struggles to achieve World class Ranking, to attain supremacy to increase revenue and attract the most talented student and faculty. Higher education is complex, costly and it always attracts attentions of politicians, employers, potential students as well as their families. The universities higher in ranks attract attention of the high caliber talented around the world and highest paid employers and reap other opportunities and thus keep on maintaining the highest standards. In most of the developing countries this feelings becomes stronger when they find no place in ranking and their standards get weaker due to lack of opportunities and resources.

Intelligent Marketing:

Competition among universities to enroll students, hire faculty, and generate revenues has been observed to be on increase in recent years. Universities have been often found to venture away from their core mission of quality education to teach and conduct basic research and enter into fierce competition for getting a better marketplace. Private universities excel in this process and some act as firms advertising their products along with any international recognition or awards they might have gained. In this process any good position in ranking of universities in relation to local competition becomes of prime importance and is used to attract students, to bring in alumni donations, to recruit faculty and administrators, and to attract potential donors. Financial demands, such as reduced government funding and pressures to limit tuition increases, have led university to transform academicians into entrepreneurs to bring in revenue from commercial activities to supplement university budgets.

Ranking dilemma:

All universities have their unique positions in relational to academic goal, areas of research concentrations, cultural prospective and aspiration of local student community. Public universities differ from private university as they need to follow national agenda and governmental procedures. When criteria and procedures are prepared to put oranges and apples in one category and are implied by external bodies without consultations with the resource universities, objections are raised on each factor. Criticism becomes highly serious when ranking affects the reputation and prestige of a university and endanger the students and staff position. Since many ranking exercises are driven by the data and information available which may not necessarily accurate or authentic while standards and positions are well recognized by the faculty, a slight shift in position of one university in relations to another is counted very seriously. When ranking systems are based on varied indicators and are manipulated in such a manner to favour some universities than whole process of ranking start losing authenticity. Criticism on the national criteria and procedures is always mitigated when ownership is provided to the universities by involving them in such exercises.
Ranking of universities in the developing countries are performed by only some countries at national level. Most of the universities in the developing world thus remain out of the international competition or any other ranking process. The international standards attained by the universities in the developed world are hard to be attained by most of the universities in the developing countries. The focus rests solely on teaching whereas the research criteria which provide the major weighting in the ranking process remains the most deficient part in almost all universities leaving behind few exceptions. If the developing countries adopt different criteria and procedures for ranking of their universities, it will enhance the gap between developed and developing countries higher education systems bringing further division between the North and South. In most of the Islamic countries, which are all developing countries, a number of universities have high standards and hold other indicators vital for competing to attain world class positions. They need to pay attention to activate their national accreditation or quality assurance systems and improve on quality of education to enter in international competition.

**Ranking of the Universities in Islamic Countries**

Ranking of Universities in Islamic countries was a part of a comprehensive programme which aimed at strengthening selected universities in the field of science/engineering, with the objective of elevating initially at least 20 Universities from the Islamic countries to the rank of Top 500 World Universities. The programmes was emanated from the resolution of the third Extraordinary Islamic Summit held in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in December 2005, which had noted with concern the fact that out of approximately 1,600 universities from 57 Islamic countries only a couple or some years none were ranked among the Top 500 World class Universities. The resolution had urged the Member States to strive for quality education and called for effective improvement and reformation of the educational institutions at all levels. The programme was of comprehensive nature targeting to introduce healthy competition among universities and higher education institutions to improve quality and to strengthened their integrated education processes and implement quality system in such a way to get the required international recognition. A core group, consisting of all relevant organizations under the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) including financial institutions, was established to supervise execution of the programme especially to oversee the preparation of a draft document on the criteria, procedures and mechanisms for ranking of universities. Necessary infrastructure was set in place including establishment of central secretariat for ranking of universities, designation of focal points in universities, mechanism for receiving, collecting and compiling data, authentication of information provided. Appropriate software for data collection and analysis were developed and system was launched to validate data. Financial support package was prepared to support universities having the potential to compete with world class universities, and also universities showing significant improvements to enable them to achieve excellence.

The Technical Experts Meeting called in to prepare criteria procedures and mechanisms for ranking of universities, constituted various working groups with specific assignments to complete and hired several consultants in academic excellence, higher education and quality management, scientometrics, bibliometrics and sociology of scientific research to complete the task. Recognizing the diversification on higher education standards of various Member States and taking into cognizance the criteria being used by the Shanghai Jiao Tong Ranking System, the Time Higher Education Supplement and other regional and national ranking systems, the working groups drafted the major criteria, procedures and mechanisms that could be best applicable for ranking of universities in the Islamic countries. Thirty major indicators were categorized under the five major criteria which were Research quality and output (50 % weighting), Quality of Education Teaching (35 % weighting), International outlook (7 % weighting), Facilities (3 % weighting), and Socio-economic impact (5 % weighting). However a number of weaknesses were identified in the process which coerced to activate the National Quality Assurance bodies. Another impediment was in the evaluation of the research performances of countries on the basis of citation studies, as most of the scientific productions
written in the national languages of Islamic countries never get chance to enter International citation indexing databases and in turn, keeping them out of the world scientists’ sight. In order to give access of this work in other languages, ISESCO established an Islamic Citation Centre to provide access to current and retrospective scientometrics and bibliographic database as well as citation indexing and analysis covering scientific journals in Arabic, Persian and Turkish and other national languages from the Member States. By end of 2007, ISC had screened and chosen about 1297 journals out of the total 5161 journals as the first batch of source journals for indexing service.

In order to demonstrate transparency, as well as to encourage, involve and provide an ownership to competing universities a Seminar was convened in April 2007 on the theme “Global Repositioning of Universities in the Islamic Countries” in which the drafted criteria, procedures and mechanism for ranking of universities was submitted for appraisal of Member States and all other concerned. The ultimate goal was to provide clear understanding of all the factors taken into consideration for the purpose of ranking, to explain how the whole process will work, to develop confidence on authenticity and unbiased approach and to ultimately seek consensus of all Islamic countries. The representatives of the countries which had launched national university ranking, UNESCO, the Time Higher Education Supplement and the Bologna European System also participated in this Seminar. Out of 57 Member States 34 didn’t take part in the Seminar. It took more time to explain the purpose and process of ranking exercise nevertheless after two days of hectic deliberations, the document was amended and adopted by consensus.

On the basis of the criteria prepared and data submitted by the some universities, first ranking list of universities of the Islamic countries was prepared but before it was officially announced it resulted in severe objections including criticism on the process of ranking, on criteria, on evaluation process and also on inadequacy or authenticity of data. Later the report on ranking of universities was submitted to the Fourth Islamic Conference of the Ministers of Higher Education and Scientific Research, held in Baku, Republic of Azerbaijan, in October, 2008. The ranking process and also the document related to criteria, procedures and mechanism for ranking of universities didn’t get any endorsement and it was decided to refer the draft document to the Member States’ ministers of higher education to further examine it and to give their opinions thereon before finally launching the process. During 2009, the Council of Foreign Ministers adopted a resolution on Higher Education Matters requesting to convene an extraordinary meeting of the Ministers of Higher Education and Scientific Research to review the feedbacks on the university ranking documents so as to take final decision concerning its implementation. When the Member States were contacted the scanty feedback received from them was discussed in a Technical Meeting of senior representatives of Higher Education Ministries held in April 2011. This time in the presence of pertinent higher education authorities more severe criticism was observed. It was recommended to abandon the process of ranking of universities in total, whereas diverse opinions on criteria were presented. The Meeting finally agreed to amend the existing document on criteria, procedures and mechanisms for university ranking and renamed it as “Key Performance Indicators for Universities in the Islamic World”, procedures and mechanisms for competing with world class universities. The Extraordinary Meeting of Ministers of Higher Education and Scientific Research is expected to meet soon to endorse this recommendation and take decision to introduce more rigorously Key Performance Indicators for universities.

**Conclusion:**

Ranking of universities is a universal requirement which attracts immediate attention of student community, parents, employers, governments, media among others. It instigates a constructive competition among universities and contributed in achieving excellence in higher education. It is and will remain as widely used reference material for decision making purposes no matter whether it has conceptual or methodological
weaknesses or it is done by specialized agencies, government higher education authorities, media or it is done at national, regional or international levels. Due to highly sensitive and controversial nature of the process of ranking, criticism on ranking process as well as on criteria, procedures and mechanism will remain a natural repercussion and should be accepted as a part of the process. In such a diverse quantification and measurement process no criteria can fit all competitors. However, when the prestige of a university will be at stake, on the basis of unauthentic data or crude calculations it will be taken more seriously and face severe consequences. Transparency of the system and provision of more ownership to the competitors will always mitigate any disparagement.

The purpose of ranking the University in the Islamic World was to promote excellence and enhance quality measures across the universities by providing a guidance reference and criteria for those universities seeking support to help them in competing with world class universities. There were clear evidences that the ranking process initiated by ISESCO helped the universities in the Islamic countries to analyze their strengths and weaknesses and to improve on those features which could excel them in international competition. It was solely our efforts or self recognition influenced by the international ranking processes, that the Ranking for the Year 2010 released by the Time Higher Education Supplement, fifteen (15) universities from the Islamic countries had already been placed under the Top 500 world class universities whereas another 6-7 universities were among the 500-600 category.