

Universities without Academic Freedom Have No Place in Rankings

Carsten A. Holz

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 or Universities

Current university rankings gloss over that which we value most: free academic discourse. In some countries, academic freedom is nonexistent. 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 management 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 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](#), which 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 its 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, 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 United States, academic freedom derives from the First Amendment on free speech, and so

Abstract

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

Current university rankings

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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. 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 United Kingdom and the United States.

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 rank of 177 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 STEM (sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields 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 does not 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 means focusing 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.

In a speech titled "What Is a University?" given in 1935 in his capacity as president of the University of Chicago, Robert M. Hutchins stated that "a university cannot exist without freedom of enquiry, freedom of discussion, and freedom of teaching," and that "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" with "comprehensive leadership of the Communist Party" and replacing the quest for truth with 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 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 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. ▲

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