

A Talk by President Michael Ming-Chiao Lai on the Academic Ranking of World Universities – 2007 Done by Shanghai Jiao Tong University



President Lai, being persevering, kind, sound and wise, is a leader loved and trusted by all NCKU members. (Photo by Ivan Tarn)

Invited by the Banyan, President Lai commented on the Academic Ranking of World Universities-2007 done by Shanghai Jiao Tong University, illustrating his development prospect for NCKU. Below is a summary of this interview.

This year, NCKU's ranking has progressed a lot compared to last year, but we still have a long way to go to achieve our goal. We want to be in Top 200, or even Top 100. This takes time to make it come true, though.

Understanding Ranking Methodology

We should understand the rationale and mechanics of university ranking. The result will be different with different ranking methodologies. Currently, the two most widely recognized university rankings are

done by Shanghai Jiao Tong University and The Times, respectively. The two rankings are quite different because of different emphasis.

The ranking done by Shanghai Jiao Tong University emphasizes on research, especially quantifiable research results and individual accomplishment. For example, a Nobel Prize will boost the ranking; highly cited researchers and papers published in Nature and Science can also boost the ranking. Therefore, we have to understand the bias in the premises of those rankings. Take it easy and use it as a reference. Rankings do not necessarily represent the quality of a university. For instance, universities in Hong Kong and Singapore rank high in The Times Ranking, but low in the Shanghai Jiao Tong University Ranking; that's why I think they serve only as a reference. During these past years, the remarkable progress of NCKU is obvious, but we still have to work harder to approach our goal.

How to Make NCKU a More Prominent University

Recruiting Outstanding Scholars

The top priority is to recruit more outstanding scholars. Nobel laureates, of course, are desirable, but not necessary. Currently, many outstanding professors and researchers have gathered at NCKU, and I believe that we will climb up a great deal in university ranking the next year.

In addition, we also encourage our faculty to do better researches. In my opinion, we should not use the number of papers to indicate research accomplishment. Quality is more important than quantity; hence we should encourage our faculty to publish papers with better quality, not just to publish more papers. In fact, our faculty have tried hard during the past few years and have published a sufficient number of papers. So, we will add more stress to our faculty if we demand them to publish more papers. That's why I don't want to demand them with quantity. We expect our faculty to do quality researches, so they can publish well recognized papers, that is, to increase their impact. If we want to improve in this respect, we also need to recruit more and better scholars to NCKU.

With respect to student-faculty ratio, according to the standards of world universities, NCKU is not good. Currently the student-faculty ratio at NCKU is about 17:1. We expect to achieve about 15:1, and that's also why we should recruit more faculty.

Upgrading the Standards of Research

With respect to upgrading the standards of research, our idea is to collaborate and to organize more teams, allowing scholars from different fields to collaborate and implement cross-disciplinary researches, which is the feature of NCKU. In this respect, NCKU owns a complete campus, the College of Medicine, Engineering, Liberal Arts, etc., are located on the same campus, which is rare among the universities around the world. Therefore we should take advantage of this and encourage cross-disciplinary collaboration.

In this respect, here at NCKU we are implementing the following two models: the first is "Outstanding Research Project", that is, to promote cream of the crop researches. We select the best research projects and teams and give them exceptional support. The second model is the so-called "Top-down" approach, in which the university defines the research topics and approaches, and then encourages the faculty to organize task forces to do the research. Currently we are mobilizing the R & D in medical devices.

What I mentioned above, I am sure, can and will boost NCKU's ranking. But I want to point out that we should not be bound by the ranking. Universities do not only serve the purpose of researches.

The Primary Goal of University Education Is to Nourish Outstanding People

What I have always emphasized is that universities exist for education, and the top priority of education is to nourish outstanding people. Apart from doing a good job on their researches, we encourage our faculty to do a good job on their teaching as well. On many occasions, I have mentioned that in the future NCKU aims to create more than outstanding professionals. NCKU has always had a good reputation for creating the most desirable graduates for corporations, which means we have substantial professional training and our graduates excel in work ethics. That's why they are recognized by the corporations.

Except for professional knowledge and skills, the talents for the 21st century need to have attainment in the liberal arts, character and morality. Hence "whole-person education" is NCKU's future goal of education. We want to provide the best educational environment, with various measurements to facilitate faculty to join and improve their teaching. Though the effort and result in this respect do not show accordingly in the ranking, I still think it crucial in university education.

Social Service is Also a Mission of Universities

Except for teaching and research, universities also have the obligation to serve the society. There are two aspects to this: one of them is to help with revitalizing economy. Our researches should be helpful to the whole economy structure by vigorous involvement with the industry. In this respect, NCKU has done pretty well and ranks top place in the national ranking. But we aim for more than that. We are embarking on more dynamic university-industry collaboration and technology transfers, helping the industry to solve their problems. This is also a critical direction in the future. Once again, though effort and result in this respect do not show accordingly in the ranking, NCKU will persist in this way.

With respect to social service, a key concept is that universities are not ivory towers. We encourage our students to be more actively involved in our society and assist it whenever possible. Empathy and a willingness to give should be among their fundamental faiths either in their university days or after graduation. Hence we encourage them to engage in community service work. It is also our educational goal to cultivate a service mentality in our students.

Conclusion

In my opinion, the ranking of top universities should include indicators from research, teaching and social service. The ranking of world universities, which we are discussing now, evaluates academic accomplishments. Of course, this is widely accepted in assessment of universities in countries around the world. Academic attainment is one of the criteria in university performance evaluation, but it is not comprehensive. Hence we need to consider it carefully, but the administration goals of university should not be distorted by rankings.

*Interviewed and summarized by Helen Chang, Photography by Ivan Tarn
The Banyan Editorial Office*

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