

The pursuit of research at the expense of teaching

Written by Tan Wei Kee

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For an institution perceived by the general public to be full of very intelligent people, the university can sometimes make very questionable choices. If the *raison d'être* of the university is to provide high quality education, then surely having first-rate teachers is a precondition for the execution of its function. In view of this, my university's recent dismissal of a much-loved professor, who has gained a reputation among students both within and outside the faculty for being a quite excellent educator, strikes me as a singularly bad decision.

The cause for the professor's dismissal was that he failed to meet the publishing quota. Granted, mine is a research university ambitious about breaking into the big league, for which high-profile publications are the foremost consideration. Yet it was not as though the professor did not publish at all, but merely "not enough", due to persistent bouts of poor health and difficulties adapting to the equatorial and mercilessly humid climate of my country. Moreover, there was his magnificent teaching prowess which in a better world, would carry far more weight in a university's decision to recruit/retain or let go teaching staff. If teaching ranked so low on universities' priorities, it should be reflected on brochures and official statements. "Let us be clear that you who choose to be a student of our college do so knowing that your education must always take second place to research."

I realise, given that the qualities associated with good teaching are subjective, I should probably explain the basis for my having such a high opinion of this professor's teaching ability. Indeed, I have spoken to a few who do not think highly of this professor's pedagogical approach, but theirs is the decidedly minority opinion, as evidenced by the scores of students up in cyber-arms over his dismissal. For him, to educate was never simply to impart what was necessary for passing examinations, but to also pass on to students the zest to work towards a happier, more peaceful, wiser mode of existence. Rarely did he miss an opportunity to remind us of the importance of knowing ourselves, to think for ourselves. To produce transcripts of lectures, which in my experience is a quite common habit among students and happily abided by most lecturers, was discouraged in his classes. What mattered was that students develop their own understanding of the text instead of taking the lecturer's interpretation as the final word. More than any teacher I've had, he was unstinting with constructive, detailed, and encouraging feedback on his students' work.

Students wouldn't be so upset if his was a common example among teachers at my university, but that is unfortunately just not the case (and this is true, I believe, in many other universities). All too often I get classes with teachers who are very prolific researchers but are either unable to communicate with students if their lives depended on it, or simply not very interested in the teaching aspects of their job. It is not that the calibre of teachers has a make-or-break effect on grades (undoubtedly it sometimes does, though it is my experience that individual effort generally counts for more), but I know of many who look for more than a gilded degree at the end of their university life. Good teachers certainly do not come in one mould, and I am by no means implying that there is not a good teacher to be found in my university, but they are very much the exception rather than the rule. Rarer still are the teachers who possess the capacity to truly inspire students beyond the classroom and long after they leave college. These won't be the professors who spend every other waking hour on research and publishing in order to further their careers or bolster the university's prestige, but the ones who place equal (indeed, greater) stock in a life well-lived as a test well-scored.

The most common method in attempting to measure teaching quality is probably by calculating the student to faculty

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ratio. I assume the underlying assumption is that the smaller the class, the better the quality of attention each student can receive from the teacher. One must take it for granted, of course, that how good teachers are depends on how big the class is, and not how well he or she can teach. Given that such a measurement of teaching quality is evidently flawed (at best, misleading at worst), I would suggest excluding it from the list of criteria on which university rankings are based. Its inclusion gives the impression that rankings are solid reflections of the standard of teaching provided by the schools. Not only are they not, the student to faculty ratio (the primary criterion pertaining to teaching) usually constitutes only a small percentage of the overall score.

High-quality teaching, so long as it cannot be accurately quantified and ranked, will always be underrated. This is compounded by many universities obsessing over their standings on league tables. Rarely does a university miss an opportunity to spread news of its inclusion on the list of the world's best. Prestige is certainly a positive thing. It puts a university on the map and attracts a larger and better pool of talents, which generate more exciting developments to propel national growth, and even helps to boost a country's soft power as larger numbers of international students and professors flock to its campus. That said, universities need to keep in mind that they are schools first, research institutions second. This hunger for prestige, which international rankings that pay scant attention to teaching standards unhelpfully abet, puts at risk not only the careers of passionate and inspirational teachers, but also the intellectual and spiritual education of students.

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