

Beyond 2011 QS Asia Universities Ranking:

Lesson learned from Association of American Universities (AAU)

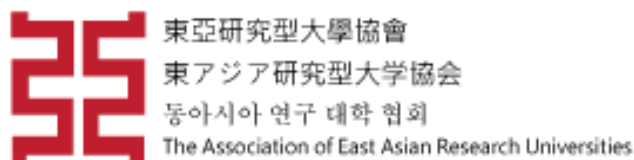
for Association of East Asia Research Universities

(AEARU 東亞研究型大學協會)

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Photo taken at AEARU meeting on April 1st, 2011. From left: DHF, President Tony Chan of HKUST, President Lih J. Chen of NTHU and Vice President M. C. Yip of NTHU.



Preamble

Global and/or regional universities ranking is a modern day academic “Olympics.” Within a short decade in the 21st century, it has already deeply penetrated into the social fabrics. This is particularly true in Asia Pacific. Indeed, it is both remarkable and expected that whenever any university ranking system announces its results, the media in Asia, and Taiwan is not an exception, goes haywire. Yesterday (May 23, 2011,) QS announced its 2011 rankings of Asia universities (which only included universities from East Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia. Middle-East universities are excluded.)

It is also understood that one should always take such rankings with a grain-of-salt. Often, media tends to examine a particular ranking in isolation, and does not try to reveal correlations with other rankings to ascertain whether there are “self-consistencies,” or more importantly, whether there is embedded new or hidden information.

To this end, for the 2011 QS Asia ranking, I found that by placing this ranking side-by-side with the other two highly visible ranking systems: 2010 Shanghai Jiaotong University ranking (better known as Academic Ranking of World Universities ARWU) and 2010 Times Higher Education (THE) world universities ranking (I took the 2010 data because the respective 2011 data are not yet available,) I was able to ascertain some my former suspicion.

Association of East Asia Research Universities (AEARU) and Association of American Universities (AAU)

A month ago, I reported that I attended the executive committee meeting of AEARU (東亞研究型大學協會) in Hsinchu. The current chair of the committee is Dr. Tony Chan (陳繁昌,) president of Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST 香港科技大學.) Also, after 2011, Academician Lih J. Chen (陳力俊,) President of National Tsing Hua University, shall assume the chairmanship.

For the above reasons, when I realized that HKUST was the “valedictorian” of 2011 QSAR, I naturally became curious as to what that would mean to AEARU. In particular, since members of AEARU were supposed to be many of the best research universities

from Japan, South Korea, China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, I wanted to see whether 2011 QSAR would support this perception. If indeed it were true, I further wondered whether the other two ranking systems, ARWU and THE, could corroborate such a conclusion. Finally, I also wondered what AEARU could learn from its “senior,” the Association of American Universities (AAU.)

I found the answers to the above questions embedded in the rankings, if they were taken collectively. The following two Tables contain the information I was looking for,

Table I. Global standing of AEARU members

AEARU University Name	2011 QSAR* /National Ranking	2010 SJTU world ranking /National Ranking	2010 THE /National Ranking
Hong Kong			
HKUST	1/1	201-300/2-4	41/2
South Korea			
Seoul National University	6/1	101-150/1	109/3
KAIST	11/2	201-300/2	79/2
Pohang U of Science and Tech	12/3	301-400/5-7	26/1
Japan			
University of Tokyo	4/1	20/1	28/1
Kyoto University	7/2	24/2	57/2
Osaka University	8/3	75/3	130/4
Tohoku University	9/4	84/5	132/5
Tokyo Institute of Tech	9/4	101-150/6	112/3
University of Tsukuba	23/8	151-200/7-9	Not in top 200
China			
Peking University	13/1	151-200/1-2	37/1
Tsinghua University	16/2	151-200/1-2	58/3
Fudan University	21/3	201-300/3-7	Not in top 200
USTC	24/4	201-300/3-7	49/2
Nanjing University	28/6	201-300/3-7	120/4
Taiwan			
National Taiwan University	21/1	101-150/1	115/2
National Tsing Hua University	31/2	301-400/3-4	107/1

QSAR = QS Asia Ranking

By putting all three ranking systems side-by-side, it is quite transparent the AEARU members are indeed some of the best universities in their respective country.

Take the case of South Korea, for example, the three universities in AEARU (Seoul National University, KAIST and Pohang University of Science and Technology) are nearly always the first, second the third ranked universities, although their positions could be “reversed.” Also, in Pohang’s case, one of the three ranking systems places it in the 5-7 position. Perhaps this indicates to us that for each ranking system, there must be inherent “error” (which is not always easy to enumerate) incurred. However, taken as a whole, we can be reasonably confident that these three universities are certainly three of the best in South Korea.

The situation is also true for China’s members in AEARU. However, there is one anomaly and that is for THE ranking, Fudan University, a well known university, is not listed in the top 200. With that as caveat, the five AEARU members do represent the best China has to offer. Likewise, in all three rankings, the Japanese AEARU members do represent the best from Japan.

With the above information, what can one learn from AAU?

AAU was organized one hundred and eleven years ago by fourteen universities in United States. The following information is the founding members current rankings by the three ranking systems.

Tanble II. American Associated Universities (AAU) Founding Members Current World standing

AAU Founding University Name	2011 QS	2010 SJTU	2010 THE
University of California Berkeley	28	2	8
University of Michigan	15	22	15
University of Wisconsin-Madison	48	17	43
University of Chicago	8	9	12
Columbia University	11	8	18
Cornell University	16	12	14
Harvard University	2	1	1
Johns Hopkins University	17	18	13
University of Pennsylvania	12	15	19
Princeton University	10	7	5
Stanford University	13	3	4
Yale University	3	11	10
Clark University	Withdrew		

	in 1999		
Catholic University of America	Withdrew in 2002		

In Table II, I was able to extract the following information.

First, while there was no such thing as ranking of universities in 1900, it is reasonably true that these were already some of the very best universities at the time. Indeed, after a century of development, twelve of the fourteen are certainly some of the most recognized and thus powerful universities on Earth today. Among the twelve, except for the University of Wisconsin at Madison who has placed in the 40's by two of the three rankings and University of California Berkeley was placed in 28 by QS, all could be designated as "highly ranked" (or <20.) The two founding members, Catholic University of America and Clark University, after a century of evolution, found that they no longer belong to this league of universities. So, just as AEARU, AAU founding members are all outstanding universities at its genesis period.

Second, despite having one hundred and eleven years of history, AAU today still has only sixty-two (62) members. For example, it took the three outstanding universities in Texas, The University of Texas at Austin, Rice University and Texas A and M University 29, 85 and 101 years before they were admitted. This is an indication of how difficult it is to become a member. Also, for the first time since its founding one hundred and eleven years ago, a member, the University of Nebraska, was asked to "leave the club." Interestingly, seeing the writings on the wall, Syracuse University voluntarily resigned its membership. Since asking a member to leave the Association requires 2/3 majority of the members agreeing, which in normal circumstances would be nearly impossible to achieve, this volatility may be an indication that AAU members have decided that it needs to shed its "old-boys" posture and maintain its "research excellence (elite)" status as its fundamental characteristics. By doing so, it could also become a more powerful voice representing research universities in United States (and to a lesser extent Canada as well since two of Canadian top universities, the University of Toronto and McGill University are also members.) This evolution of AAU for the past century could very well give AEARU an indication as to how it may evolve in the 21st century.

Third, there is one fundamental difference between AAU and AEARU. For AAU, except for the two Canadian universities, all members are within the United States.

For AEARU, members are from Japan, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea. Thus the cultural differences between the universities of AEARU from different countries are more than those in AAU. Hence, to find a “collective voice” representing research intensive universities in East Asia in AEARU may be more arduous than AAU members in United States. After all, the relationship between Japan, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea are politically complex and convoluted. Of course, if a collective voice could indeed be found in this landscape in the 21st century, AEARU as an “international organization” may become even more important than AAU, which is a uni-national organization.

Epilogue

I am pleased that 2011 QSAR had sparked one to look at East Asia universities in different light. By reflecting on the evolution of AAU in the 20th century, I am confident that one will see an equally exciting evolution of AEARU in the 21st century.