

# The Daily Star

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## Bangladesh and the World University Rankings



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**Milan Pagon and Sarwar J Minar**

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With unprecedented internationalisation of higher education, the world university rankings have become prominent globally and have significant impact on students' higher study decisions. Rankings portray the comparative position of a

university nationally, regionally and internationally. The students, guardians, fresh and seasoned academics take rankings seriously to decide where to apply and the donor and funding agencies whom to award the fund as rankings reveal vital information on performance, strengths, and weaknesses of universities around the world.

There are various rankings, some are rigorous and professional while others are ad-hoc. The most popular professional rankings are the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU, also called Shanghai Ranking), the Quacquarelli Symonds Ranking (QS), the Times Higher Education Ranking (THE), the Ranking Web of Universities (RWU).

Unfortunately, most of the rigorous and popular world university rankings publish only the list of the top 500 or 1,000 universities in the world. On the other hand, the RWU publishes a list of almost all the universities in the world. Therefore, for countries like Bangladesh, the RWU is more relevant because other than Dhaka University and BUET, no Bangladeshi universities are included in the top 1,000 in other rankings.

All the rankings have critics (for instance, QS rankings are being criticised for relying too heavily on opinion survey as opposed to hard data). Despite various criticisms these rankings do converge to a large extent. Among the top 25 universities listed in the RWU, 18 are among the ARWU's top 25, 12 are among the QS's top 25, and 16 are among the THE's top 25. As the rankings of the RWU are very similar to the other rankings at the top, it is safe to assume that they would be similar in the other parts as well. In July 2018, the RWU included more than 27,000 universities worldwide. Given a high degree of convergence among these rankings we can thus consider the RWU to be a good approximation of what the rankings of other universities would be according to ARWU, QS and THE, if those rankings went below 500 or 1,000 top universities.

The RWU has been published by the Cybermetrics Lab, the largest scientific institution in Spain, sponsored by the European Commission since 2004 and claims to be the only ranking that is not done for commercial purposes. The RWU is not a ranking of university websites and web design is totally irrelevant, taking web presence and visibility as indicators of global performance of a university in teaching, research, and perceived international prestige. The RWU measures the performance of universities with 4 key indicators: Presence—5 percent, Visibility (Impact)—50 percent, Transparency (Openness)—10 percent, and Excellence—35 percent, compiling data from reliable open data sources (Majestic, AhRef, Google Scholar).

Now that we have established that the RWU is the most useful ranking in our context, let's have a look at how Bangladeshi universities are doing according to this ranking. In July 2018 edition, 146 Bangladeshi universities and medical colleges

were included. A closer look at the top 10 Bangladeshi universities reveals that there are three private universities among them, the first is BRAC, the second is IUB, and the third is NSU. The other 7 are public universities (in order of the rank): BUET, University of Chittagong, Rajshahi University, Jahangirnagar University, Bangladesh Agricultural University, Khulna University of Engineering & Technology, and Shahjalal University of Sciences & Technology. Dhaka University has traditionally been in the top 3 but it has now dropped to 28th position. We are confident that the DU authorities will look into the matter closely.

The data Cybermetrics Lab gathers in the process of rankings may also be used for other purposes. For instance, the RWU used to publish a “Ranking Web of Researchers” that ranked the top researchers by country according to their Google Scholar (GS) Citations. It ranked 56 countries worldwide, up until a year ago, when this ranking was discontinued. Bangladesh was initially included in the ranking and then dropped from the list. When contacted, the Cybermetrics Lab responded that there were so many unclean profiles and duplicate entries that they had no choice but to drop Bangladesh's name. While this was embarrassing for the country, the problem doesn't end there. Individual researchers' profiles are still counted towards the rankings of the universities to which they belong. The unfortunate consequence is that some Bangladesh university rankings are inflated due to unclean profiles or duplicate entries of their faculty members.

To better understand the issue, let us go into some details. The RWU uses GS database to measure scholarly work and citations. A citation is a reference to a published research work. If a researcher uses another researcher's work as a source, the latter gets a citation. This is acknowledgement of others' work which upholds intellectual honesty and reflects the impact of research.

While GS is a very useful reference, both for publications and citations, it depends on the authors to create and maintain their public profiles. The problems can occur due to academic dishonesty or, more likely, a simple negligence. It is important and a matter of academic integrity to maintain a clean GS profile. Bad practices can have very negative consequences for the reputation of the individual, the institution, and the country. We came across a lecturer at a Bangladeshi private university, a PhD student, whose profile included 2,992 entries with 12,739 citations. That was more entries and citations than many Bangladeshi universities have as a whole. While this has since been corrected, it serves as an example of what might happen if we do not pay adequate attention to our public profiles. The reason is that the author did not disable automatic updating in their GS profile. As a consequence, the system added others authors' works to their profiles, as long as those authors had the same last name and same first initial.

As previously mentioned, opening profile in GS database is voluntary, maintaining the profile is the responsibility of the author. The authors must be cautious about bad practices and clean their profiles periodically. Additionally, the institutions should monitor their members' profiles for intended (or unintended) incorrect or duplicate records. According to the RWU, any institution with these problems will be excluded from future editions of the ranking.

Rankings are useful and serve their purpose only if they are based on valid data. Following the rankings for 5 years, we can say that Bangladesh is waking up to the importance of rankings and GS profiles. The number of GS profiles has increased dramatically. Unfortunately, there are still many Bangladeshi scholars who create their profiles but do not keep them clean or even have duplicate profiles. It is in our own interest not to misrepresent our achievements. Only then the rankings will make sense and the students, guardians, academics, governments, and funding agencies can use the rankings confidently.

We are urging all Bangladeshi academicians to contribute to the validity of the RWU rankings by creating Google Scholar profiles and keeping them clean.

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***Professor Milan Pagon is Pro-Vice Chancellor, Independent University, Bangladesh. Sarwar J Minar is Senior Officer, International Programs and Relations, Independent University, Bangladesh.***

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