

The ranking of UniRank has been the talk of the town since last week as the University of Mauritius (UoM) has been ranked at the 85th place. In this interview, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Planning & Resources) of UoM Mohammad Issack Santally shed light on this controversy as well points out the transformation of the university post Covid-19.

MOHAMMAD ISSACK SANTALLY:

“We aspire to make UoM and Mauritius a hub for medical education in the region”

Nafissah Fakun

■ There is a controversy about the ranking of UoM. What do you have to say about it?

First of all, the ranking of UniRank is not based on academic components. It is a ranking of Universities based on their popularity, which is measured by the web traffic that passes through these websites.

On the other hand, the media has wrongly reported that it is a ranking of RUFORUM. RUFORUM is an association of African Universities concerning Agriculture. It has released a statement highlighting that in the ranking released by UniRank, 24 of its member Universities are listed in the Top 100.

Coming to the University of Mauritius, our web traffic varies throughout the year according to the different events that take place at the University. For instance, during our admission period, there is an increase in the traffic, while during the term time majority usage of the website is internal. As an example, the University of Nairobi ranked 7th on this UniRank, has about 84000 students enrolled, as compared to a student population of roughly 10000 for UoM. Another example is the University of Zimbabwe ranked 72 in the UniRank. University of Zimbabwe has 20000 students. However, the University has listed its research budget to be 41M USD and it has about 800 academic staff. University of Namibia ranked 39th has about 30000 students, three times our current student population. On Webometrics ranking, which accounts for research outputs as well, University of Zimbabwe is ranked 40, University of Namibia is ranked 104th while UoM is at the 52th place.

So, what are we exactly talking about? What is the benchmark that we want to use? How reliable are those ranking in terms of a real assessment of the quality of teaching, research and innovation of the institutions concerned? We do not have an issue with the media reporting on this ranking, but our concern is that there is erroneous information that is being relayed by a few persons especially those within academia, with the unique motive to cause harm to the University.



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■ Does this ranking has an impact on the image of the university?

No, it does not as long as it is being properly conveyed. However, the way this ranking has been portrayed in the media impacts on the perception of the public on the University. We are not claiming that everything is perfect and that we are satisfied with the way things are at UoM. This is not the case, as we always want to continuously improve on all aspects of our operation from teaching and learning to research, consultancy and services to our students.

■ What the population should understand about this ranking?

The key element that we want to highlight is that this ranking does not in any way imply a decrease in the quality of teaching and learning or in terms of research output. On the other hand, there are also other types of ranking, such as the one used by Webometrics, which also include inter-alia research output, citations and the

research profiles of academics on Google Scholar. On that ranking, we are 52th in Africa and 33rd in Sub Saharan Africa.

The population has to understand that despite all what is being said, the University of Mauritius is still No1 in Mauritius according to both UniRank and Webometrics ranking alike. On the other hand, the population also has to understand, that due to our size in terms of the population in Mauritius, the student population, and academic staff numbers at the University, it is clear that it is not a level playing field when it comes to international ranking using metrics linked to web traffic for instance.

Furthermore, our degrees are highly valued abroad and are internationally recognized. People should not forget the University of Pretoria and the University of Cape Town, are the top Universities in Africa and they have linkages with the University of Mauritius concerning our medical degree programmes.

■ Otherwise, how teaching at the university has changed post Covid-19?

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Covid-19 has been a catalyst for the adoption of new teaching models and practices. However, I have to point out, that the University had already shifted to the learner-centred credit system and had a technology-enabled learning policy in place. The University Senate has also approved a teaching standards framework to improve the learning experience of our students. Recently we have approved the Digital Learning and Transformation Strategy with the aim to accelerate the adoption of ICTs to improve our systems and processes. An implementation working group is already operational and as from September 2020, virtual lectures will be an integral component of our teaching and learning model.

■ How many courses have shifted online?

For the past two decades, we have been promoting online courses in Management, ICTs, and Education Technology. It was our objective to integrate ICTs in our teaching and learning processes. Our emphasis is not on online distance education courses but mainly on the use of digital technologies to conduct real-time virtual lectures. This is coupled with face-to-face tutorials and practical in the classroom to ensure that learning outcomes are effectively met. This is known as the flipped classroom model. We are aiming that at least 30% of each module will be offered under this model as from the new academic year. However, there is some flexibility as we want to ensure a smooth transition at a large scale.

■ A new faculty of medicine has been set up. Why this new faculty?

This was a recommendation of the Visitor's report in 2013. The setting up of the Faculty will open up new avenues for high-end research and international partnership in the field of medicine and the health sciences. At the same time, we are re-engineering the Faculty of Science and the Faculty of

Agriculture and they will operate as one Faculty. This allows us to be in line with the Visitor's report and to maintain the same number of Faculties.

■ Will this new faculty attract more students?

Every year we have a high demand for our medical degree programmes, and we are not able to respond to such high demand for a few reasons. The first one is the fact that we do not have a full-fledge faculty of medicine and health sciences. Our resources are therefore limited. With the new faculty, we will be able to admit more students. We have very stringent selection criteria for medical programmes. We are also aiming at the recruitment of more international students in Medicine. In the long term, we aspire to make the UoM and Mauritius a hub for medical education in the region.

■ Many students complain that after university, they find it hard to get a job. Should not there be an upskill programme for them?

It is a fact that the job openings are not the same in different sectors. Graduates in ICT, for instance, often get jobs before completing their studies. On the other hand, in some other sectors, such as History or Political Sciences, it might be a bit more difficult. In certain areas, there might be too many graduates for the jobs available.

Over the past two years, we have been working with the HRDC and Accenture under the Graduate Trainee Employment Scheme, to take unemployed graduates in non-IT fields, to train them for a Master's programme to make them employable in the ICT sector.

We also engage with industry to provide placement opportunities for our students. With respect, to upskilling, we have recently launched the iLearn initiative, which is an online capacity building platform to provide training and upskilling to young graduates, professionals and the public in general to improve their employability.