NUS versus NTU: Looking beyond the rankings

My heart sank some weeks back when I read a report on university rankings.

My alma mater had dipped in a world university ranking. It didn’t help that the other “big” university in town had gone some notches up. I waited for the sniggers. I am proud of, and loyal to, Nanyang Technological University (NTU), from which I graduated last year with Honours (Second Class Upper) in journalism.

After the report came out, a friend – who barely scraped through his four years in the National University of Singapore (NUS) graduating without honours as an engineer – insisted that his degree was more valuable than mine.

He pointed to the latest survey of international universities by The Times of London Higher Education supplement, the one that had caused my heart to sink. NUS had risen three places to No. 30 while NTU had fallen eight places to No. 77 on the list of 200 universities.

He continued his attack: NUS is ranked way above NTU in every global league table of universities compiled.

In 2006, when Newsweek compiled a list of top 100 universities, it put NUS at No. 31, ahead of top American institutions like Brown University – an Ivy League college – and the prestigious Australian National University in Canberra.

NTU was ranked No. 71. I struggled to counter what my friend said. After all, Singapore students grow up in awe of individual and school rankings.

When I was in Secondary 2, I came in fourth in a class of 40 and my parents rewarded me with a Switch watch. I also remember how I was last in class in Primary 5. I kept my head bowed throughout the December holidays that year.

In junior college, I wanted to go to only NTU, not because I felt it was prestigious or cool but because it was the only university here with a journalism school.

Looking back, the kind of rivalry now rife among NUS, NTU and the more recent Singapore Management University (SMU) was hardly an intense one up to 2003.

In fact, when Nanyang Technological Institute became a university in 1991, it admitted students jointly with NUS and charged the same fees.

The Government did this to avoid a replay of the 1970s when Chinese-educated graduates from the then-Nanyang University lost out to their English-educated peers from the then-Singapore University when it came to job and pay prospects.

Those who went to university in the 1990s said that to some extent, the joint admission prevented comparative exercises by students or competitive exercises by the universities – the schools were less differentiated and both were seen to be as good or relatively equal.

The joint-admission requirement was so effective that for the longest time, students did not see much difference between the two universities, and neither did employers. Students made only one application and they would be accepted by either university if their results were good enough.

But in 2004, students could apply separately to both universities and receive offers from both. The rule change meant that students had a choice of which university they wished to go to.

Since then, the two universities have battled to distinguish themselves. Where a one-size-fits-all model in university education used to be the case, students increasingly agonised over which institution to go to.

SMU entered the scene in 2000 with an aggressive marketing campaign which forced the two older universities to enter the world of branding and marketing.

SMU has since been portrayed as the “hip” and “vibrant” school where classes are interactive and students think outside the box.

NUS is seen as the top all-round university with history and tradition on its side, and NTU prides itself as a science and technology-intensive university.

But it has had to fight a public perception that the school was “boring”.

Last year, the university launched a series of advertisements in the print media when its 2007 class graduated. One full-page ad featured smiling, good-looking people who did well and got into top jobs. But the headline, in big red letters, read: Leaders for tomorrow (sic).

Alas. In no time, my friends and colleagues were talking about it. “The leaders obviously can’t spell,” they joked.

I have to confess that when I saw the report that NTU’s ranking had fallen in the Times of London ranking, proud as I am of my alma mater, I questioned whether my degree was in fact less valuable.

In NTU’s defence, when contacted, its provost, Professor Bertil Andersson, said any self-respecting university at a high level takes rankings with a pinch of salt.

He explained that the range of education offered and measures of quality are so diverse that it is inaccurate and inadequate to measure universities only along certain parameters.

Six categories count towards The Times of London’s ranking: academic peer review, employer review, faculty-to-student ratio, citations per faculty, international faculty and international students.

“Other contributing factors are that as a science and technology-intensive university, we lose out somewhat on factors like humanities and natural sciences which were established only in recent years. Citations take time to build up so a new school takes time to contribute,” said Prof Andersson.

My heart agreed, but my head still asked: Surely, ranking does count for something?

Singapore Human Resources Institute executive director David Ang said that a university’s reputation gives employers only an indication of the graduate’s quality.

“It makes a difference if you’re from Harvard or from some unknown school,” he said. “But what’s most important is the individual’s experience and attitude.”

Prof Andersson’s advice: Don’t be a slave to the rankings, let the rankings inspire you to find out more.

That advice has shown me the way to resolve my head versus heart dilemma.

After all, NUS, founded in 1905, has a good 86-year head start. NTU was established only in 1991.

I am confident that with time, NTU will close the gap between it and NUS.

In blogs and online forums, the “NTU versus NUS dilemma” is often discussed. Some prospective students are foreigners looking to do postgraduate studies.

Many netizens end up recommending NUS simply because it is “more recognised”, has a “better reputation” and “higher ranking” than NTU.

So, people do perceive ranking as important, and many act on it.

But the underdog status can be a powerful motivational force.

Sales manager Jerry Chan, 32, said NTU graduates are highly motivated. The NTU business school graduate works in a multinational corporation and makes about $10,000 a month.

NUS may be more well-known and prestigious, but give NTU time and it will catch up,” he said. “After all, it’s the alumni who determine the degree, not the other way around.”

Prof Andersson’s advice: Don’t be a slave to the rankings, let the rankings inspire you to find out more.

In blogs and online forums, the “NTU versus NUS dilemma” is often discussed. Some prospective students are foreigners looking to do postgraduate studies.

Many netizens end up recommending NUS simply because it is “more recognised”, has a “better reputation” and “higher ranking” than NTU.

So, people do perceive ranking as important, and many act on it.

But the underdog status can be a powerful motivational force.

Sales manager Jerry Chan, 32, said NTU graduates are highly motivated. The NTU business school graduate works in a multinational corporation and makes about $10,000 a month.

NUS may be more well-known and prestigious, but give NTU time and it will catch up,” he said. “After all, it’s the alumni who determine the degree, not the other way around.”

Prof Andersson’s advice: Don’t be a slave to the rankings, let the rankings inspire you to find out more.

That advice has shown me the way to resolve my head versus heart dilemma.

After all, NUS, founded in 1905, has a good 86-year head start. NTU was established only in 1991.

I am confident that with time, NTU will close the gap between it and NUS.

mavistoh@sph.com.sg