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**THE CAREERS  
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**T**here are few easier ways for newspapers and magazines to generate a buzz than to print a list ranking the best of anything — from the greatest rock albums to the most essential books. And last month, *The Times Higher Education Supplement* followed suit, getting tongues wagging in academia around the world when it published its list of the 200 best universities.

The usual suspects made up the top 20, but the rankings awarded to the other 180 have proved a hot topic for conversation. This was abundantly clear to me while I was in Taiwan and Japan recently. Speaking to administrators there, it seemed that the most controversial point in the league table was the huge amount some institutions had moved in the space of 12 months. What did Beijing's Tsinghua University do, for example, to warrant it leaping from number 62 last year to 28 this year? And why did the French-speaking Brussels Free University plunge from 76 to 165 over the same period?

The answers lie in the indicators used as benchmarks to draw up the table. These include factors such as the number of citations per faculty member and the number of students and faculty members recruited from abroad. Although such indicators are useful, the administrators I spoke to in the Far East can't be alone in wondering whether these numbers can really tell anyone which university is better than another.

The people who may be most helped — or misled — by these scores are students and postdocs looking for the best place to begin their scientific career. One university administrator's son I spoke to, now weighing up which graduate school to attend, asked me about the importance of such lists. I told him that they help cement the reputations of world-class institutions; but I added that an institution's pedigree may not be the most important factor when choosing where to study. If you think in terms of tangibles such as funding, publications and available infrastructure, as well as intangibles such as granting first authorship on papers or teaching you new skills, then the quality of the principal investigator trumps prestige every time.

**Paul Smaglik, *Naturejobs* editor**

**Editor:** Paul Smaglik  
**Assistant Editor:** Gene Russo

**European Head Office, London**  
The Macmillan Building,  
4 Crinan Street,  
London N1 9XW, UK  
Tel: +44 (0) 20 7843 4961  
Fax: +44 (0) 20 7843 4996  
e-mail: [naturejobs@nature.com](mailto:naturejobs@nature.com)

**European Sales Manager:**  
Andy Douglas (4975)  
e-mail: [a.douglas@nature.com](mailto:a.douglas@nature.com)  
**Business Development Manager:**  
Amelie Pequignot (4974)  
e-mail: [a.pequignot@nature.com](mailto:a.pequignot@nature.com)

**Natureevents:**  
Claudia Paulsen Young (+44 (0) 20 7014 4015)  
e-mail: [c.paulsenyoung@nature.com](mailto:c.paulsenyoung@nature.com)  
**France/Switzerland/Belgium:**  
Muriel Lestringuez (4994)

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**Online Job Postings:**  
Matthew Ward (+44 (0) 20 7014 4059)

**European Satellite Office**  
**Germany:** Patrick Phelan  
Tel: +49 89 54 90 57 11  
Fax: +49 89 54 90 57 20  
e-mail: [p.phelan@nature.com](mailto:p.phelan@nature.com)

**Advertising Production Manager:**  
Stephen Russell  
To send materials use London address above.  
Tel: +44 (0) 20 7843 4816  
Fax: +44 (0) 20 7843 4996  
e-mail: [naturejobs@nature.com](mailto:naturejobs@nature.com)

**Naturejobs web development:** Tom Hancock  
**Naturejobs online production:**  
Catherine Alexander

**US Head Office, New York**  
75 Varick Street, 9th Floor,  
New York, NY 10013-1917  
Tel: +1 800 989 7718  
Fax: +1 800 989 7103  
e-mail: [naturejobs@natureny.com](mailto:naturejobs@natureny.com)

**US Sales Manager:** Peter Bless

**Japan Head Office, Tokyo**  
Chiyoda Building, 2-37 Ichigayatamachi,  
Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 162-0843  
Tel: +81 3 3267 8751  
Fax: +81 3 3267 8746

**Asia-Pacific Sales Manager:**  
Ayako Watanabe  
e-mail: [a.watanabe@natureasia.com](mailto:a.watanabe@natureasia.com)