



Universities Should Cultivate Scholars, Not Merely Produce Measurable Indicators: A Reflective Commentary

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Abstract

Modern universities are increasingly governed through Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), quality assurance frameworks, accreditation exercises, and institutional rankings. While these mechanisms are intended to improve accountability and educational quality, they may inadvertently shift academic priorities from the cultivation of scholarship toward the production of measurable outputs. This reflective commentary examines the tension between authentic scholarship and performance driven academic management. It argues that universities should primarily serve as communities that nurture intellectual curiosity, scientific inquiry, ethical reasoning, and lifelong learning rather than organizations that focus predominantly on numerical indicators and administrative documentation. Drawing upon literature on higher education, scholarship, academic freedom, and audit culture, this commentary reflects on the changing identity of universities and the implications of excessive reliance on measurable indicators. The discussion emphasizes that genuine educational impact often develops over many years through mentorship, research inspired teaching, and sustained intellectual engagement, outcomes that cannot be fully captured through annual evaluation systems. Rather than rejecting accountability, this paper advocates a more balanced evaluation framework that recognizes both measurable achievements and the less tangible but equally valuable dimensions of scholarly contribution. Universities flourish when they trust scholars to pursue knowledge, inspire students, and advance society through independent inquiry. The future of higher education therefore depends not only on measuring academic activities but also on preserving the intellectual values that have historically defined the university.

Keywords: Higher Education; Scholarship; University Governance; Academic Freedom; Performance Indicators; Research Informed Teaching; Reflective Commentary

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Received Date: 28 Jun 2026

Accepted Date: 08 Aug 2026

Published Date: 10 Aug 2026

Citation:

Chee Kong Yap. Universities Should Cultivate Scholars, Not Merely Produce Measurable Indicators: A Reflective Commentary. *WebLog J Depress Anxiety*. wjda.2026.h1011. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22075341>

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Introduction

Universities have historically existed as institutions dedicated to the discovery, preservation, and dissemination of knowledge. Beyond awarding degrees, they have served as communities where scholars pursue truth, challenge existing assumptions, mentor future generations, and contribute to societal advancement through research and education [1, 2]. Throughout history, universities have been recognised not merely for producing graduates but for cultivating scholars capable of independent thinking and responsible leadership.

In recent decades, however, the governance of higher education has increasingly been shaped by measurable performance indicators. Academic staff are now evaluated through Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), publication counts, citation indices, grant income, accreditation documentation, teaching evaluations, curriculum mapping, innovation activities, and institutional rankings [3, 4]. These developments have improved transparency and accountability, yet they have also raised important questions regarding whether universities are gradually replacing the pursuit of scholarship with the pursuit of measurable evidence.

Beyond institutional accountability, universities worldwide are increasingly influenced by ranking systems, citation indicators, accreditation frameworks, and multiple layers of performance measurement. Although these mechanisms seek to improve transparency and competitiveness, they frequently assess proxy indicators rather than the actual quality of scholarship, student intellectual development, or societal contributions [5, 6]. Recent discussions also suggest that many ranking systems measure institutional inputs and processes more effectively than they evaluate the competence, creativity, and long-term development of graduates [7]. Consequently, the original mission of universities may gradually shift from cultivating scholars toward optimizing measurable institutional performance.

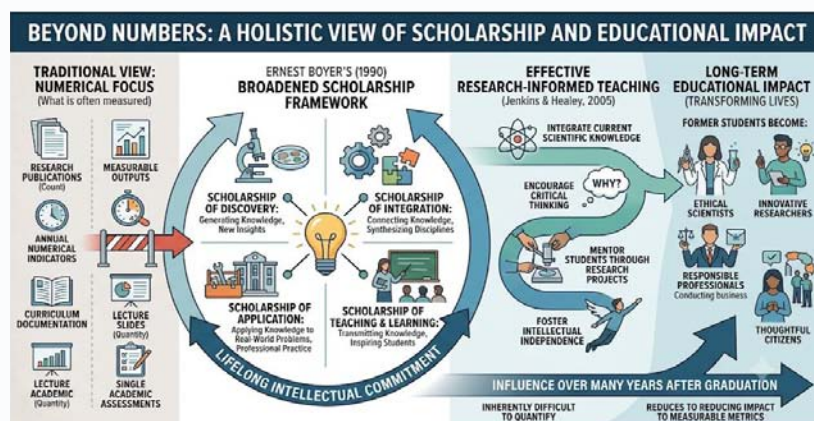


Figure 1: A Holistic View of Scholarship and Educational Impact: Moving Beyond Numerical Metrics to Lifelong Transformation.

Note: Diagram generated by Google Gemini based on the text and conceptual ideas of the author.

The objective of this reflective commentary is to examine whether contemporary universities remain faithful to their traditional mission of cultivating scholars or whether increasing dependence on performance indicators risks reducing higher education to an administrative exercise.

Scholarship Beyond Numbers

As illustrated in Figure 1, academic scholarship extends far beyond the traditional, easily quantifiable metrics such as publication counts, curriculum documentation, and annual numerical indicators. By mapping Ernest Boyer's [8] foundational framework, the diagram highlights that true academic work functions as a dynamic, lifelong intellectual commitment divided into four interconnected dimensions: the scholarship of discovery, integration, application, and teaching. Rather than viewing education as a passive delivery of lecture slides or a series of single academic assessments, Figure 1 shows how effective research-informed teaching integrates current scientific knowledge to foster critical thinking and intellectual independence. Ultimately, the diagram underscores that the most profound educational outcomes are inherently difficult to quantify; a teacher's true, long-term impact is realized years after graduation through the cultivation of ethical scientists, innovative researchers, responsible professionals, and thoughtful citizens.

Boyer [8] fundamentally broadened the understanding of scholarship by proposing that academic work encompasses the scholarship of discovery, integration, application, and teaching. His framework reminds us that scholarship cannot be reduced solely to research publications or measurable outputs. Instead, scholarship represents a lifelong intellectual commitment to generating, connecting, applying, and transmitting knowledge.

Similarly, research informed teaching represents far more than delivering lecture slides or completing curriculum documentation. Effective educators integrate current scientific knowledge into classroom discussions, encourage critical thinking, mentor students through research projects, and foster intellectual independence [9]. Such educational contributions often influence students many years after graduation rather than during a single academic assessment period.

Many of the most influential educators are remembered not because they generated perfect documentation but because they

transformed the lives of their students. Their impact appears through former students who become ethical scientists, innovative researchers, responsible professionals, and thoughtful citizens. These long-term educational outcomes are inherently difficult to quantify using annual numerical indicators.

The Rise of Audit Culture in Higher Education

As illustrated in Figure 2, the rise of audit culture in higher education is fuelled by multiple sources of accountability, including governments and accreditation agencies, which demand extensive evidence across various administrative domains. The diagram highlights the central tension this creates for academic staff, who are crushed by an escalating workload of reporting and documentation, as analyzed by Molina-Molina *et al.*, [6] and Power [4]. This administrative burden is shown to directly compete for the time and energy required for substantive academic work, such as research, scientific writing, and student mentoring. Furthermore, Figure 2 visualizes critical principles, such as Goodhart [10]'s Law, demonstrating how performance measures used as targets can lose their meaning and encourage behaviors that prioritize narrow metrics over educational substance and broader societal missions. The diagram culminates by illustrating how these systemic pressures can lead universities to unintentionally reward administrative compliance while undervaluing the critical intellectual leadership and sustained research needed for long-term institutional and student success.

The increasing emphasis on accountability has introduced what Power [4] described as the "audit society," in which organizations rely heavily on documentation to demonstrate performance. Universities are now required to produce extensive evidence supporting curriculum quality, accreditation compliance, teaching innovation, quality assurance processes, and institutional governance.

The expansion of performance indicators has accelerated in recent years. Universities are increasingly required to report numerous indicators simultaneously to governments, accreditation agencies, funding organisations, ranking bodies, and internal quality assurance offices. Molina-Molina *et al.*, [6] observed that the growing diversity of science, technology, and innovation indicators has generated increasingly complex measurement systems that demand extensive administrative reporting. While these systems improve accountability, they also increase compliance workloads that may

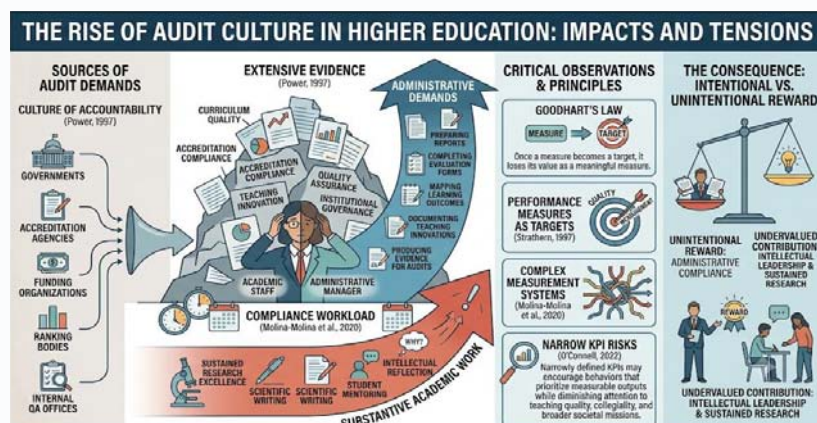


Figure 2: The Impact of Audit Culture in Higher Education: A Systemic Analysis of Demands, Tensions, and Unintended Consequences.

Note: Diagram generated by Google Gemini based on the text and conceptual ideas of the author.

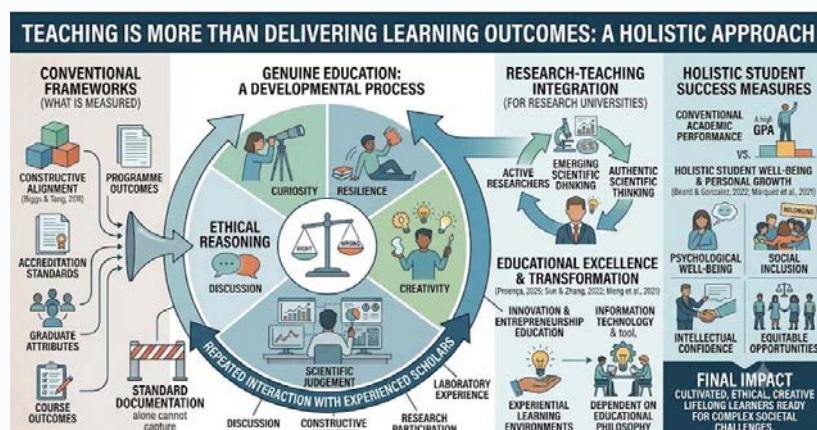


Figure 3: Teaching Beyond Learning Outcomes: A Holistic Framework for Developmental Education and Student Well-Being.

Note: Diagram generated by Google Gemini based on the text and conceptual ideas of the author.

reduce the time available for research, mentoring, and intellectual reflection.

The experience following the COVID-19 pandemic further illustrates this challenge. O'Connell [11] argued that narrowly defined university KPIs may unintentionally encourage behaviours that prioritise measurable outputs while diminishing attention to teaching quality, collegiality, and universities' broader societal missions. Such tensions are particularly evident when academic staff are simultaneously expected to maximise research productivity, teaching effectiveness, administrative compliance, and community engagement within fixed performance cycles.

Although accountability remains essential for public institutions, problems arise when documentation gradually becomes more important than educational substance. Power [4] observed that performance measures often become targets themselves rather than indicators of underlying quality. This observation closely reflects Goodhart [10]'s Law, which suggests that once a measure becomes a target, it loses much of its value as a meaningful measure.

Within universities, academic staff increasingly spend substantial amounts of time preparing reports, completing evaluation forms, mapping learning outcomes, documenting teaching innovations, and producing evidence for institutional audits. While these activities

contribute to governance, excessive administrative demands inevitably reduce the time available for research, student mentoring, scientific writing, and intellectual reflection.

Consequently, universities may unintentionally reward academics who excel in administrative compliance while undervaluing those whose greatest contributions lie in sustained research excellence, scientific mentorship, and intellectual leadership.

Teaching is More Than Delivering Learning Outcomes

As illustrated in Figure 3, contemporary higher education relies heavily on conventional compliance frameworks - such as constructive alignment, graduate attributes, and standardized documentation - to maintain curriculum consistency. However, the diagram highlights that genuine education functions as an iterative, developmental process driven by repeated interaction with experienced scholars through discussions, research participation, and laboratory experience. Rather than viewing research and teaching as competing entities, Figure 3 shows how active researchers organically feed emerging scientific insights and authentic thinking back into the classroom. This integration fuels educational excellence and transformation, blending innovation, entrepreneurship, and technology under a unified educational philosophy. Ultimately,

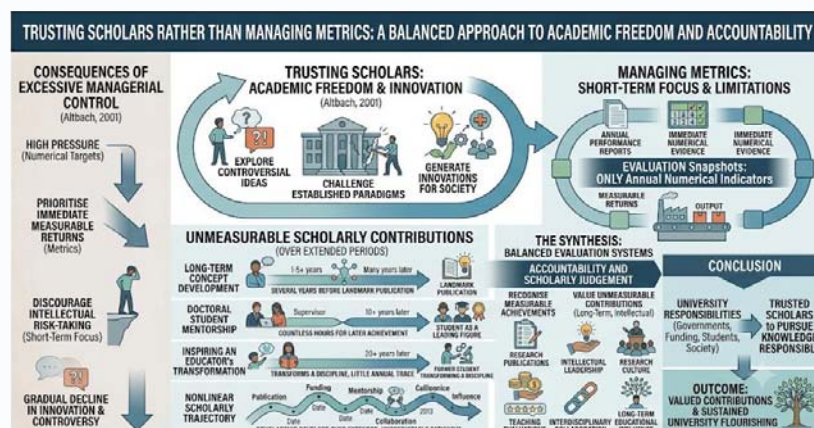


Figure 4: Academic Trust vs. Managerial Control: A Systemic Framework for Balanced Evaluation and Scholarly Flourishing.

Note: Diagram generated by Google Gemini based on the text and conceptual ideas of the author.

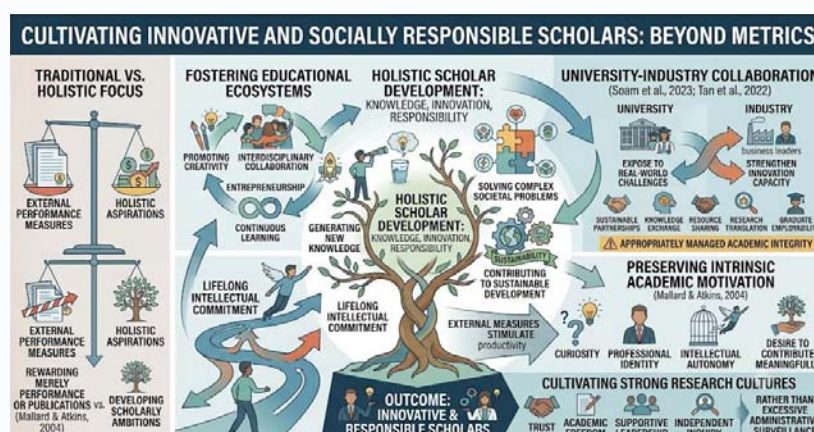


Figure 5: A Systemic Framework for Developing Innovative and Socially Responsible Scholars through Holistic Education, University-Industry Collaboration, and Preserved Motivation.

Note: Diagram generated by Google Gemini based on the text and conceptual ideas of the author.

the diagram underscores that student success must transcend conventional academic performance indicators (like GPA) to holistically measure psychological well-being, social inclusion, intellectual confidence, and equitable opportunities, culminating in the cultivation of ethical, lifelong learners prepared for complex societal challenges.

Contemporary higher education frequently emphasises constructive alignment, course outcomes, programme outcomes, accreditation standards, and graduate attributes [12]. These frameworks undoubtedly contribute to curriculum consistency and quality assurance. Nevertheless, genuine education extends far beyond achieving predefined learning outcomes.

Education is fundamentally a developmental process. Students do not simply acquire knowledge through lectures; they gradually develop curiosity, resilience, ethical reasoning, creativity, and scientific judgement through continuous interaction with experienced scholars. These qualities emerge through repeated questioning, discussion, constructive criticism, independent reading, laboratory experience, and research participation.

For research universities, teaching and research should never be viewed as competing responsibilities. Instead, research provides

the intellectual foundation upon which meaningful teaching is built. Active researchers continuously update their knowledge, introduce emerging scientific discoveries into classrooms, and expose students to authentic scientific thinking. This integration enriches education in ways that standardized documentation alone cannot capture [13].

Educational excellence also extends beyond cognitive achievement. Universities are increasingly expected to cultivate innovation, entrepreneurship, ethical reasoning, creativity, resilience, and lifelong learning. Innovation and entrepreneurship education has therefore become an important dimension of higher education, requiring experiential learning environments rather than simple classroom instruction [14, 15]. Information technology can facilitate these educational transformations, but its effectiveness depends upon educational philosophy rather than technological implementation alone [16].

Equally important is the recognition that successful universities develop inclusive learning communities where students experience belonging, well-being, and equitable opportunities for personal growth. Measures of student success should therefore include psychological well-being, social inclusion, and intellectual confidence alongside conventional academic performance indicators [17, 18].

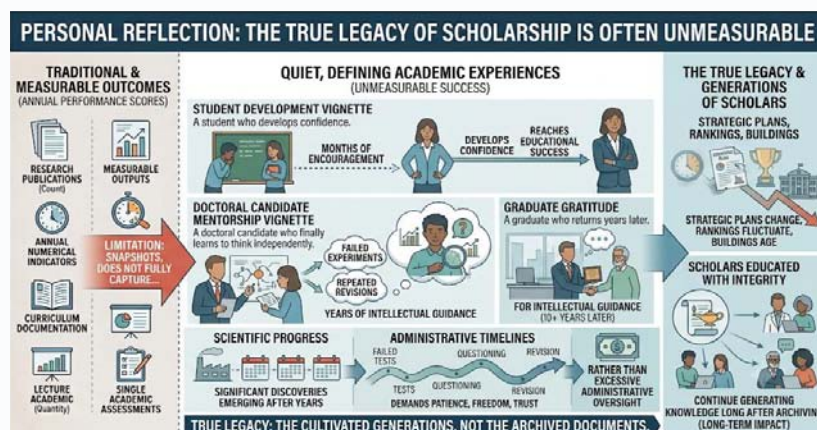


Figure 6: Personal Reflection on Academic Legacy: The Unmeasurable Dimensions of Student Transformation, Scientific Discovery, and Long-Term Impact.
Note: Diagram generated by Google Gemini based on the text and conceptual ideas of the author.

Trusting Scholars Rather Than Managing Metrics

As visualized in Figure 4, the core tension in contemporary university governance lies between trusting scholars' responsible pursuit of knowledge and managing metrics for accountability. The diagram contrasts the consequences of excessive managerial control, which is shown to create high pressure and a distinct prioritization of immediate measurable returns, thereby discouraging intellectual risk-taking and leading to a gradual decline in innovation and the exploration of controversial ideas. In opposition to this metrics-focused approach, Figure 4 highlights the dynamic process of trusting scholars, which is essential for academic freedom and innovation, allowing researchers to challenge established paradigms and generate innovations for society over extended and often nonlinear trajectories. A critical component of the figure is its synthesis of several examples of crucial unmeasurable scholarly contributions - including long-term concept development, doctoral student mentorship, and transformative inspiration - which are inherently difficult to capture in annual numerical indicators and evaluation snapshots. Ultimately, the diagram argues for a synthesis, where balanced evaluation systems recognize and reward measurable achievements while simultaneously valuing the long-term, intellectual contributions and responsible use of academic freedom that allow universities to fulfil their broad societal missions and sustain their flourishing.

Universities flourish when they trust scholars to pursue knowledge responsibly. Academic freedom has historically enabled researchers to explore controversial ideas, challenge established paradigms, and generate innovations that benefit society [19]. Excessive managerial control, however, may gradually discourage intellectual risk taking by encouraging academics to prioritise activities that generate immediate measurable returns.

Not every valuable academic contribution produces immediate numerical evidence. A researcher may spend several years developing an original scientific concept before producing a landmark publication. A supervisor may invest countless hours mentoring doctoral students whose greatest achievements emerge many years later. An educator may inspire a student who eventually transforms an entire scientific discipline despite leaving little trace within annual performance reports.

These examples demonstrate that scholarship develops over

extended periods and often follows nonlinear trajectories. Annual evaluation systems therefore provide only snapshots of academic activity rather than comprehensive assessments of scholarly contribution.

This reflection does not argue against accountability. Universities have legitimate responsibilities to governments, funding agencies, students, and society. Rather, it argues that accountability should complement rather than replace scholarly judgement. Balanced evaluation systems should recognise measurable achievements while also valuing mentorship, intellectual leadership, research culture, interdisciplinary collaboration, and long-term educational influence.

Beyond Metrics: Cultivating Innovative and Socially Responsible Scholars

Figure 5 provides a comprehensive visual summary of a university ecosystem designed to cultivate innovative and socially responsible scholars, moving explicitly beyond the limitations of purely external metrics. It contrasts a traditional focus on performance and publication counts against holistic aspirations that encompass generating new knowledge, solving complex societal problems, and contributing to sustainable development. A dynamic central cycle illustrates how this holistic development is powered by 'Fostering Educational Ecosystems,' promoting crucial dimensions like creativity, interdisciplinary collaboration, entrepreneurship, and continuous learning, rather than merely rewarding examination or publication outputs. This development is further enriched through 'University-Industry Collaboration' (referencing [20, 21]), which is visualized as creating sustainable partnerships that expose scholars to real-world challenges while strengthening innovation capacity and graduate employability, all while carefully managing academic integrity. Critically, the framework emphasizes 'Preserving Intrinsic Academic Motivation' (as analyzed by [22]), demonstrating that while external measures may stimulate productivity, long-term commitment is sustained by core values like curiosity, professional identity, intellectual autonomy, and the desire to contribute meaningfully to society. As depicted, this preservation requires 'Cultivating Strong Research Cultures' anchored in trust, academic freedom, supportive leadership, and independent inquiry, directly contrasting against excessive administrative surveillance. The entire diagram culminates in a unified outcome: the successful development of innovative and responsible scholars who embodying lifelong

intellectual commitment, capable of thriving in complex modern society and driving positive, sustainable change.

Modern universities should aspire to develop graduates who are capable not only of acquiring knowledge but also of generating new knowledge, solving complex societal problems, and contributing responsibly to sustainable development. Such ambitions require educational ecosystems that promote creativity, interdisciplinary collaboration, entrepreneurship, and continuous learning rather than merely rewarding examination performance or publication counts [14, 15].

Collaboration between universities and industry further enriches scholarly development by exposing students to real-world challenges while strengthening innovation capacity. Sustainable partnerships facilitate knowledge exchange, resource sharing, research translation, and graduate employability without compromising academic integrity when appropriately managed [20, 21]. These collaborations demonstrate that scholarship extends beyond publications into practical contributions that benefit society.

Equally important is the preservation of intrinsic academic motivation. Although external performance measures may stimulate productivity, long-term scholarly commitment is often sustained by curiosity, professional identity, intellectual autonomy, and the desire to contribute meaningfully to society [22]. Universities therefore cultivate stronger research cultures when they create environments characterised by trust, academic freedom, supportive leadership, and opportunities for independent inquiry rather than excessive administrative surveillance.

Personal Reflection

As illustrated in Figure 6, an academic career encompasses a profound duality between traditional, measurable metrics and the quiet, defining experiences that represent the true essence of scholarship. The diagram maps out how standard performance indicators - such as publication counts, annual numerical markers, curriculum documentation, and assessment quantities - fail to fully capture the authentic value of academic work due to their nature as superficial, short-term snapshots. Through detailed developmental vignettes, Figure 6 highlights that genuine educational success is found in unmeasurable moments: a student building confidence over months of quiet encouragement, a doctoral candidate achieving intellectual independence after years of close mentorship, or a graduate returning a decade later to express gratitude for intellectual guidance. Furthermore, the diagram visualizes scientific progress not as a linear path matching rigid administrative timelines, but as an unpredictable journey of failed tests, continuous questioning, and persistent revisions that demands patience, institutional trust, and academic freedom. Ultimately, the framework demonstrates that while physical infrastructure ages, strategic plans shift, and institutional rankings fluctuate, the true legacy of a university rests entirely in cultivating generations of scholars who, educated with integrity, continue to generate knowledge and impact society long after administrative records have been archived.

Throughout an academic career, one gradually discovers that the most meaningful achievements are rarely the easiest to measure. Research publications, citations, grants, patents, and teaching evaluations undoubtedly represent important indicators of productivity. Yet many defining academic experiences occur quietly behind office doors, within research laboratories, during fieldwork,

or through conversations with students struggling to understand difficult concepts.

A student who develops confidence after months of encouragement, a doctoral candidate who finally learns to think independently, or a graduate who returns years later to express gratitude for intellectual guidance represents educational success that no annual performance score can fully capture.

Similarly, scientific research rarely progresses according to predetermined administrative timelines. Significant discoveries frequently emerge after years of failed experiments, repeated revisions, and persistent questioning. Scholarship therefore demands patience, intellectual freedom, and institutional trust rather than excessive administrative oversight.

The true legacy of a university is not measured solely by annual reports but by the generations of scholars it cultivates. Buildings eventually age, strategic plans change, and institutional rankings fluctuate. However, scholars educated with integrity continue generating knowledge long after administrative documents have been archived.

Conclusion

The future success of universities should not be judged solely by institutional rankings, publication counts, citation indices, or annual performance reports. Rather, it should be reflected in their ability to cultivate scholars who think critically, conduct responsible research, innovate ethically, collaborate across disciplines, contribute to society, and inspire future generations. Accountability and performance measurement remain necessary components of modern higher education, but they should serve scholarship rather than define it. A balanced evaluation framework that integrates research quality, educational excellence, innovation, societal engagement, student well-being, and long-term scholarly impact offers a more faithful representation of the university's enduring mission.

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

The author declares that generative artificial intelligence tools were used in a supportive capacity during the preparation of this manuscript. These tools assisted with language refinement, structural organisation, and stylistic clarity of the text. All ideas, interpretations, reflections, and conclusions presented in this paper are the author's own and are grounded in personal experience and scholarly judgment. The author retains full responsibility for the content, accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

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