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INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY RANKINGS AND THEIR IMPACT ON HIGHER EDUCATION EFFECTIVENESS: ANALYSIS AND CASE STUDY

Abstract. This study examines the role of international university rankings (QS, THE, ARWU, WURI) in improving the institutional effectiveness of higher education systems. Rankings are increasingly used as a benchmark for assessing the quality of universities that shape strategic priorities in the areas of research, internationalization, and governance.

The study results show that participation in global rankings contributes to institutional modernization: universities increase their scientific publications, improve their teaching staff, implement foreign-language programs, and develop partnerships with foreign universities. Negative effects of rankings have also been identified: focusing on a limited set of indicators leads to a decrease in attention to the quality of education, social inclusion, and regional mission of universities.

A comparative analysis of the cases of Australia, South Korea, Kazakhstan, and the United Kingdom showed that the effectiveness of improving rankings depends on consistent government support, institutional flexibility, and strategic orientation. It is also found that alternative rankings, such as the WURI, allow universities to reconsider their work in terms of social contribution, innovation, and sustainability.

Keywords: international rankings, university performance, strategy, quality of education, institutional reforms, social responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

Modern universities are increasingly influenced by global rankings such as the QS World University Rankings, Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE WUR), Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), and World's Universities with Real Impact (WURI). These tools claim to provide an objective assessment of university quality and set benchmarks for students, employers, donors, and governmental bodies.

Under the influence of rankings, university strategies are more frequently designed not based on internal academic priorities but with the aim of improving positions within the global hierarchy. This affects funding structures, international partnership policies, management decisions, and academic recruitment. Meanwhile, concerns grow that rankings predominantly emphasize publication and reputation metrics, with limited attention to pedagogical quality, university missions, and the social significance of their activities.

The relevance of this research lies in the need to reconsider whether rankings truly contribute to improving educational quality or whether they stimulate reputational strategies and mimic reforms. The focus of the analysis is on the logic of ranking metrics, the institutional consequences of their dominance, and possibilities for building alternative systems to assess university effectiveness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Two main positions emerge in the academic literature regarding the role of university rankings. Supporters of rankings view them as tools for increasing transparency, accountability, and global competitiveness of universities [1, 2]. Opponents, however, point to methodological and conceptual limitations, especially reductionism, where complex educational processes are reduced to a limited set of formalized metrics [3].

Hazelkorn (2015) and Marginson (2023) emphasize that rankings contribute to forming institutional ambitions and provoke the development of "ranking management", the strategic adaptation of universities to ranking requirements, often at the expense of educational missions [1, 4]. This is especially characteristic of transition economies, where rankings become an external benchmark of academic prestige [5].

Studies reveal a weak correlation between high ranking positions and actual teaching quality. The problem is exacerbated in non-English-speaking countries, where rankings often fail to reflect national contexts and educational system features [6].

Alternative models, such as WURI and the More Than Our Rank initiative, propose new criteria for assessing university effectiveness – contributions to sustainable development, innovation, social transformation, and entrepreneurial activity [7, 8]. These approaches enable moving beyond the traditional research ethos and acknowledging the diversity of university missions.

Thus, the literature highlights that rankings have a real impact on universities' strategic behavior but do not always foster genuine improvement in educational quality and often shift the focus from teaching to research activity and prestige indicators.

METHODOLOGY

The present study employs qualitative, critical-structural, and comparative approaches to reveal the institutional consequences of universities' inclusion in the logic of global ratings. The main focus is the analysis of the transformation of university efficiency evaluation models under the influence of international metrics (QS, THE, ARWU, WURI).

Methodological methods are followed:

Content analysis methods used by rating agencies (QS, THE, ARWU, WURI) to identify key performance indicators, including scientific productivity, internationalization, academic reputation, and industrial partnerships.

Comparative analysis of strategic universities in four countries: Australia, South Korea, Kazakhstan, and Great Britain. The countries were selected on the basis of differences in the level of economic development, policy in the sphere of higher education, and the degree of institutional autonomy.

Interpretation of the influence of ratings on internal processes of evaluation of effectiveness, including financing, personnel policy, development priorities, and teaching activities.

Synthesis of empirical and normative sources, such as university reports, government strategies, rating databases (2020–2025), publications in Frontiers in Education, Higher Education Quarterly, Materials of UNESCO, OECD, and EUA.

The methodology allowed us to assess not only the quantitative aspects of university adaptation to international rankings but also the qualitative dimensions, including transformations in governance, shifts in the understanding of the university's mission, and evolving models of institutional effectiveness. In particular, secondary data included interviews and public statements from management, teachers, and researchers, as recorded in published academic studies, industry reports, and materials from international organizations. Analyzing these sources revealed quotes that reflect the perception and impact of international rankings on university strategies and internal processes. This approach connected quantitative indicators with qualitative aspects, such as changes in workload, the balance between teaching and research, and the perception of reforms within the academic community.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study confirm that international university rankings have a profound and complex impact on the strategic behavior of universities, changing the perception of their effectiveness. Under the pressure of global indicators, universities redefine management priorities, academic strategies, and the content of educational programs, striving to conform to the logic of the rankings. However, the effectiveness understood within the framework of the rankings is significantly different from the result that corresponds to the social mission of universities and the quality of the educational process.

As shown in Table 1, each ranking system establishes its priority hierarchy: QS encourages the development of academic and corporate reputation; THE focuses on scientific productivity, internationalization, and citations; while ARWU focuses exclusively on the research elite and Nobel laureates. This structure of indicators creates a distorted model of effectiveness, in which high-quality teaching, outreach, contribution to regional development, and the social mission of universities are systematically marginalized [9, 10]. Shin and Kehm (2012), for instance, point out that institutions are compelled to expand the quantity of publications in Scopus journals due to global competition, even if this does not align with our long-term educational aims [11].

Table 1. Metric sets and structural priorities of modern global rankings (QS, Times Higher Education, ARWU)

Ranking	Key indicators	Structural features	Criticism
QS World University Rankings	Academic reputation (40%), employer reputation (10%), student/faculty ratio, internationalization	Predominance of subjective assessments, high dependence on image and communication strategy	Strengthening symbolic capital, reputational distortions, ignoring teaching
THE Rankings	Teaching, research, citations, international prospects, income from industry	Formally a comprehensive model, but an emphasis on scientometrics and internationalization	Increased pressure on research productivity, underestimation of the social mission of universities
ARWU (Shanghai Ranking)	Nobel laureates, publications in Nature/ Science, citation index	Absolute focus on the scientific elite and productivity	Exclusion of the humanities, ignoring regional contribution, priority of large, English-language universities

Source: compiled by the authors based on literature

This structure of metrics yields several consequences. First, it creates a hierarchy of disciplines in which STEM fields gain an advantage, while the humanities and social sciences lose priority. Second, universities are forced to reorient their internal processes to the requirements of rankings. Third, it creates global academic inequality, in which the greatest preferences are received by English-language, large, and wealthy universities with historical baggage, while local universities focused on social function and regional development are marginalized [1, 12]. According to experts, rankings are now a daily indicator of performance that dictates the allocation of resources, just like the stock market does for businesses [13].

To more deeply assess the heterogeneity of the influence of rankings, a case analysis was conducted using four countries: Australia, South Korea, Kazakhstan, and the United Kingdom. These cases enable us to examine how the national context and level of institutional autonomy influence the effects generated by global metrics.

A comparative case analysis, presented in Table 2, revealed a variety of institutional strategies for adapting to rating pressure:

In **Australia**, rankings are deeply embedded in the management culture of universities. Universities such as the University of Melbourne and the Australian National University include QS and

THE indicators in their strategy documents, actively promote international publications, English-language programs, and student mobility [1, 4]. However, the focus on rankings entails an uneven distribution of resources, with the humanities gradually losing support in favor of the STEM fields that are prioritized by rankings [6]. Australian experts claim that engineering labs receive the majority of university financing, although their school's philosophy used to be a source of pride [14].

South Korea exemplifies an institutionalized dependence on rankings. The government initiative Brain Korea 21 creates a KPI system that embeds international ranking indicators, thereby shaping everyday management practices at universities such as Seoul National University and POSTECH [7, 5]. Despite high positions in global rankings, the system is characterized by high standardization, increased workload for teachers, and decreased academic freedom. According to scholars, South Korean institutions are having less and less time to interact with students, despite publishing more articles in a variety of research disciplines [15].

In Kazakhstan, the influence of rankings is less sustainable. Here, universities such as Nazarbayev University and Al-Farabi Kazakh National University formally adapt the practices of global universities, focusing on positions in rankings, but at the same time retain features of the post-Soviet governance model, including limited autonomy, bureaucratization of processes, and declarative reforms [16, 3]. The contradictions between the goals of internationalization and the real capabilities of universities become especially noticeable against the backdrop of a funding shortage and weak research potential. Although Kazakhstani institutions are competing for rankings, analysts pointed out that their labs and libraries fall short of those of global leaders [17].

The British system demonstrates the most mature form of ranking integration. Here, international rankings interact with national assessment mechanisms, in particular the Research Excellence Framework (REF), which determines the distribution of research funding [18]. Universities such as the University of Oxford and University College London use their global rankings to attract investment, talent, and international partnerships. However, this system has side effects: teaching is marginalized, competition between staff increases, and administrative workloads grow [19, 1]. Scholars underlined that the REF and international rankings have increased competition to such an extent that we have a sense of being under a permanent stress test [20].

Table 2. Comparative analysis of cases

Country	Nature of the impact of rankings	Dominant strategy of universities	Side effects
Australia	Market-oriented	Increased publications, internationalization	Decline of humanities
South Korea	Institutionalized model	KPI, standardization, focus on scient metrics	Pressure, decreased academic freedom
Kazakhstan	Fragmented impact	Imitation of practices, declaratory reforms	Limited autonomy, weak implementation
United Kingdom	Integration with national frameworks	Balance between REF and rankings	Teaching in the shadows, bureaucratization

Source: compiled by the authors based on the literature

A comparison of these cases shows that the understanding of university effectiveness depended on ranking indicators. In most cases, it led to an increase in institutional effectiveness, but the concept of effectiveness itself was redefined in terms of external metrics rather than internal missions and values. Universities began to view academic development through the prism of quantitative indicators, which stimulates an increase in publication activity, expansion of international cooperation, and increased competitiveness in the global education market.

At the same time, such a model inevitably forms a strategy of "focus on indicators," in which long-term goals related to the development of critical thinking, support for local communities, and ensuring high-quality teaching recede into the background. As a result, a dual effect is formed: on the one hand, universities demonstrate growth in key international criteria, which contributes

to their visibility and reputation; on the other hand, there is a narrowing of the academic agenda, marginalization of local and socially significant areas, and increased administrative pressure on teachers and researchers. This imbalance creates the risk of standardization of educational strategies according to the dominant models of the global North, which, in the long term, could lead to the loss of cultural and regional diversity of university systems.

Table 3 examines the institutional and programmatic effectiveness of two important performance metrics of institutions that are heavily impacted by national and worldwide rankings.

The analysis shows that there is a consistent, systematic divide between these levels, which is a reflection of disparities in resource allocation and priorities. Most of the time, the rise in a university's ranking is used to gauge the performance of the institution. Universities make active investments to improve their faculty's publication activity, update their research facilities, and broaden their selection of English-language courses in order to meet this metric, which makes them more appealing to international students and encourages the citation of scientific research.

These steps enhance the university's standing internationally and enable quick improvements to the official measurements used in rankings.

On the other hand, program effectiveness is still largely overlooked and treated as a secondary concern. Course curricula are updated slowly and may not always reflect current scientific findings or labor market demands. Teachers' opportunities for methodical work and one-on-one engagement with students are sometimes limited by heavy administrative and reporting workloads. Interaction with employers and alignment of programs with graduates' actual career paths are frequently lacking and underdeveloped.

According to European University Association (EUA) experts, this change in focus from the caliber of instruction and the learning process to success in publishing and research endeavors [21] has in fact enabled several universities to rise in global rankings. Nevertheless, this has not always been accompanied by better academic outcomes, higher levels of student happiness, or increased employability.

Table 3. Comparison of institutional and programmatic effectiveness of universities under rating pressure

Analysis parameter	Institutional effectiveness (in the logic of the rating)	Program effectiveness (in the logic of the educational mission)	Inconsistencies and challenges
Key indicators	Number of publications, citation index, international recognition	Quality of curricula, relevance of content, learning outcomes	Indicators of publication activity ≠ learning outcomes
Management guidelines	Improving positions in the ranking, internationalization, official KPI	Social contribution, student satisfaction, graduate employment	Prioritizing official indicators
Focus on education policy	Science and international cooperation	Teaching, competence development, accessibility of education	Undervaluing teaching in the university strategy
Incentive subjects	STEM, biomedical and technical sciences	Pedagogy, humanities and applied programs	Marginalization of humanities
Funding mechanisms	Monitoring learning outcomes, satisfaction and social contribution	Through publications, grants, reputation ratings	Through unequal distribution of resources
Impact on teachers	Increased reporting burden, emphasis on scientific productivity	Reduced time for lesson preparation, demotivation, mission conflict	Imbalance between research and teaching
Impact on educational programs	Formalization, standardization, imitation of innovations	Flexibility, connection with the labor market, inclusion of soft skills	Mismatch between the real needs of students and the market

Source: compiled by the author based on the analysis of data and literature

International rankings, initially conceived as a tool for increasing transparency, comparability, and global integration in higher education, have over time become a powerful force in standardizing academic strategies and unifying the priorities of universities worldwide. A focus on a limited set of quantitative indicators, often related to publication activity, citation rates, and the volume of attracted funding, has shifted attention away from the comprehensive development of educational systems toward the achievement of formal benchmarks. As a result, the real goals of education, developing competencies, fostering critical thinking, and training specialists who are in demand in society and the economy, are often replaced by tasks aimed directly at improving positions in ranking tables.

In this regard, the need for a profound rethinking of the existing system for assessing the effectiveness of universities becomes clear. Such a revision requires a shift from the dominance of quantitative metrics to a more balanced model that considers not only formal results, but also the quality of educational programs, their alignment with current and future societal needs, their level of social relevance, their contribution to regional development, and real learning outcomes measured through the professional achievements of graduates and their impact on public life. Only through a comprehensive approach, assessing universities not by a narrow set of statistical indicators but by a combination of academic, social, and cultural factors, can the higher education system remain globally competitive while preserving its high social value and ensuring the sustainable development of both individual regions and the country as a whole [5, 22].

CONCLUSION

The research indicates that international university rankings influence how universities operate strategically. They define a single standard of academic success, where quantitative metrics, publication counts, citation rates, and internationalization dominate. Meanwhile, social mission, educational value, and regional development are pushed aside.

Rankings influence universities in many ways: universities integrate ranking indicators into planning or sometimes just mimic the requirements. The degree to which universities depend on rankings depends on their autonomy, national policy, and cultural history. Though countries differ, rankings always act as a hidden controller, shifting resources and academic goals. This raises competition, increases bureaucracy, and sidelines fields not valued by global metrics.

Universities in developing countries are especially vulnerable in this system. Here, the focus on rankings is often combined with insufficient institutional maturity, which creates a gap between external expectations and internal capabilities. The result is imitation strategies, symbolic reforms, and formal reporting that do not lead to real changes in the quality of education.

In the long term, such dependence creates a more homogeneous model of higher education, focused on the standards of the global North. This carries the risk of losing academic diversity, reducing the ability of universities to take into account national priorities, and undermining the sustainable development of educational systems.

To reduce these risks, it is necessary to move from a strategy of passively following rankings to their conscious and critical use. This involves:

- creating national quality assessment systems taking into account regional and social priorities;
- implementing comprehensive indicators that reflect not only scientific but also educational, cultural, and social performance;
- developing funding mechanisms that support a wide range of university missions, and not just scientometric indicators.

International rankings can be a useful tool for global positioning, but only if they are integrated into a broader, context-oriented development strategy. Universities that can combine external standards with internal values and priorities will gain a sustainable advantage, preserving academic integrity and social significance in the context of global competition.

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УНИВЕРСИТЕТТЕРДІҢ ХАЛЫҚАРАЛЫҚ РЕЙТИНГТЕРІ ЖӘНЕ ОЛАРДЫҢ ЖОҒАРЫ БІЛІМ БЕРУДІҢ ТИІМДІЛІГІНЕ ӘСЕРІ: ТАЛДАУ ЖӘНЕ ЖАҒДАЙДЫ ЗЕРТТЕУ

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Аңдатпа. Бұл зерттеуде халықаралық университет рейтингтерінің (QS, THE, ARWU, WURI) жоғары білім беру жүйесінің институционалдық тиімділігін арттырудағы рөлі қарастырылған. Рейтингтер зерттеу, интернационалдандыру және басқару саласындағы стратегиялық басымдықтарды қалыптастыратын университеттердің сапасын бағалаудың эталоны ретінде көбірек қолданылады.

Зерттеу нәтижелері жаһандық рейтингтерге қатысу институционалдық модернизацияға ықпал ететінін көрсетті: университеттер ғылыми басылымдарды белсендіруде, оқытушылардың біліктілігін арттыруда, ағылшын тіліндегі бағдарламаларды жүзеге асырып, шетелдік университеттермен серіктестік байланыстарды дамытып жатыр. Сондай-ақ, рейтингтердің жағымсыз әсерлері де анықталды: индикаторлардың шектеулі жиынтығына назар аудару оқу сапасына, әлеуметтік инклюзияға және университеттердің аймақтық миссиясына көңіл бөлудің төмендеуіне әкеледі.

Австралия, Оңтүстік Корея, Қазақстан және Ұлыбритания кейстерін салыстырмалы талдау рейтингтегі позицияларды жақсартудың тиімділігі тұрақты мемлекеттік қолдауға, институционалдық икемділікке және стратегиялық бағыттылыққа байланысты екенін көрсетті. Сонымен қатар, WURI сияқты балама рейтингтер университеттердің жұмысын қоғамның үлесі, инновация және тұрақтылық тұрғысынан қайта қарастыруға мүмкіндік беретіні де анықталды.

Түйін сөздер: халықаралық рейтингтер, университет көрсеткіштері, стратегия, білім сапасы, институционалдық реформалар, әлеуметтік жауапкершілік.

МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫЕ РЕЙТИНГИ УНИВЕРСИТЕТОВ И ИХ ВЛИЯНИЕ НА ЭФФЕКТИВНОСТЬ ВЫСШЕГО ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ: АНАЛИЗ И КЕЙС-СТАДИ

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Аннотация. В статье рассматривается роль международных рейтингов университетов (QS, THE, ARWU, WURI) в повышении институциональной эффективности систем высшего образования. Рейтинги всё чаще используются как ориентир для оценки качества университетов, формируя стратегические приоритеты в сфере науки, интернационализации и управления.
Результаты исследования показывают, что участие в глобальных рейтингах действительно способствует институциональной модернизации: университеты активизируют научную публикационную активность, повышают квалификацию преподавателей, внедряют англоязычные программы и развивают партнерства с зарубежными вузами. Однако выявлены и негативные эффекты – ориентация на ограниченный набор показателей приводит к снижению внимания к качеству преподавания, социальной инклюзии и региональной миссии вузов.
Сравнительный анализ кейсов Австралии, Южной Кореи, Казахстана и Великобритании демонстрирует, что эффективность повышения позиций в рейтингах зависит от наличия устойчивой государственной поддержки, институциональной гибкости и стратегической целеустремлённости. Кроме того, альтернативные рейтинги, такие как WURI, открывают возможности для переосмысления университетской эффективности в терминах общественного вклада, инновационности и устойчивого развития.
Ключевые слова: международные рейтинги, эффективность университета, стратегия, качество образования, институциональные реформы, социальная ответственность.