

TO RANK OR NOT TO RANK: THE GLOBAL OBSESSION WITH WORLD-CLASS UNIVERSITY STATUS

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1 INTRODUCTION

The idea of the “world-class university” has become a central ambition for higher education institutions globally, representing aspirations of academic excellence, research leadership and international recognition. This concept is often assessed through global university rankings, such as those by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), Times Higher Education (THE) and the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU). In countries like Uzbekistan, which are undergoing significant higher education reforms, these rankings have played a crucial role in shaping university governance, policies and priorities. Uzbek universities are increasingly seeking recognition through global rankings as means of modernising, gaining prestige and integrating into the global academic community. Yet, this growing focus on rankings raises important questions about what truly defines a “world-class” institution. Are rankings the most accurate or valuable measure of excellence? This paper explores these questions by examining the role of reputation management in the pursuit of global recognition and compares Uzbekistan’s ranking-driven strategy with global examples of universities that prioritize their core missions over external metrics.

2 MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study employs a comparative and interpretive approach to examine how global university rankings influence national higher education reforms and university-level strategies. Focusing on Uzbekistan as a primary case study, the research explores the broader impact of rankings-driven governance in post-Soviet and emerging higher education systems. The study draws on a range of sources, including scholarly literature, institutional strategies and publicly available data from international ranking frameworks. Furthermore, the research considers how universities’ obsession with rankings and world-class university lists may affect their core educational missions and how reputation management and university brand management are used to navigate the pressures of global rankings. To provide a balanced perspective, the analysis also incorporates international case studies that present both pro and con arguments regarding the role of rankings in shaping higher education. These materials were critically analysed to uncover key patterns, tensions and strategic decisions related to global benchmarking and the local educational missions of universities.

3 RESULTS

The analysis reveals that Uzbek universities consistently embrace global university rankings as key indicators of modernisation, competitiveness and international recognition. In this pursuit, institutions often claim to prioritise measurable performance metrics such as research output, publication volume and international visibility. However, in practice, much of the institutional focus remains on increasing student enrollment, improving physical infrastructure and achieving superficial recognition in rankings, often without substantial investment in research quality or capacity.

This rankings-oriented approach often comes at the expense of other foundational functions, including teaching excellence, academic rigor and social responsibility. The findings suggest a narrowing of university priorities, where rank-driven objectives are pursued at the cost of deep, mission-driven academic work. Despite referencing global benchmarks, the quality and impact of research within many Uzbek universities remain limited and underdeveloped.

In contrast, several internationally renowned universities, particularly in Europe and parts of Asia have intentionally distanced themselves from the competitive rankings race. These institutions prioritise academic freedom, public service and educational integrity, advocating for alternative understandings of excellence that are not solely dependent on quantifiable metrics. This divergence highlights a growing global debate over what truly constitutes a world-class university and the risks of over-relying on rankings in shaping higher education priorities.

4 CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that while reputation management and rankings-based competitiveness can provide universities with short-term international visibility, they may also undermine the deeper purposes of higher education, particularly in emerging systems like Uzbekistan's, where institutional identity, autonomy and public responsibility are still evolving. The findings suggest that the growing emphasis on global metrics, branding and market-driven indicators often leads to a narrowing of institutional priorities, where form is privileged over substance.

In many cases, this results in the neglect of core academic missions such as high-quality teaching, critical inquiry, and meaningful societal engagement. Moreover, the pursuit of "world-class" status, when defined primarily by rankings, risks creating a homogenised model of excellence that fails to reflect local contexts and developmental needs.

The study therefore advocates for a more context-sensitive and mission-driven vision of university development, one that prioritises academic integrity, educational relevance and long-term public impact over superficial performance indicators. Reframing the notion of excellence in these terms is essential to supporting more sustainable, inclusive and meaningful trajectories for higher education, both in Uzbekistan and beyond.

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