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Embracing a rational approach toward "the ranking rush"

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ABSTRACT: *This research briefly examines the growing influence of major global university rankings, such as QS, THE, ARWU, and U.S. News & World Report, on institutional strategies. Using document analysis and a narrative review, this study investigates the "ranking-mania" driven by perceived links between league tables and institutional reputation. Comparative mapping of ranking methodologies shows that reputation and research indicators currently dominate the landscape, whereas indicators of student outcomes remain minimal. These findings suggest that current metrics often fail to reflect the diverse needs of domestic and international students. Consequently, the study recommends that institutions move beyond the "ranking rush" to adopt a rational, mission-centric strategy that prioritizes substantive institutional improvements over the pursuit of fluctuating external metrics.*

Keywords: university ranking, rational approach, mission-centric strategy, education quality, global competition

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INTRODUCTION

In the increasingly competitive and globalized higher education landscape, institutional leaders rigorously monitor their standing within major global ranking systems, including the QS World University Rankings (QS), Times Higher Education (THE), ShanghaiRanking Consultancy's Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), and the US News and World Report (USNWR) Best Global Universities (US News BGU). Since the USNWR initiated this trend in 1983, university rankings have assumed a significant, albeit controversial, role in the sector (Davis, 2016). Functioning as critical marketing assets, these rankings exerted an increasing influence, not merely as instruments of domestic reputation but also as vital mechanisms driving internationalization strategies and global recruitment. This high-stakes reliance has fundamentally reshaped institutional strategy and stakeholder decision-making, incentivizing "strategic gaming" behaviors to preserve or advance global standing.

Universities across diverse higher education systems adopt distinct strategic responses to ranking incentives. Asian institutions often address ranking pressures through state-funded "excellence initiatives" and a strategic pivot toward English-language scholarship to amplify global visibility. Conversely, U.S. institutions often resort to "gaming" strategies, such as manipulating institutional data to safeguard their competitive standing (Shahjahan & Baizhanov, 2023). Meanwhile, European systems have undergone structural consolidations and legislative reforms, transitioning from egalitarian traditions toward vertically stratified, research-intensive profiles that are incentivized by global metrics.

This high-stakes environment has institutionalized ranking objectives within mission statements and strategic planning, particularly among public universities, necessitating substantial resource allocation. For example, the University of Houston explicitly integrated the goal of "Building a Top 50 Public University" in the USNWR into its institutional vision (UH, n.d.), whereas Russian universities expended $3,871,378 on 128 QS-related consultancy contracts between 2013 and 2020 (Chirikov, 2023). However, such a concentrated focus on metric optimization risks diverting institutional attention from the core missions of pedagogical excellence and student learning. Simultaneously, rankings serve as pivotal heuristics in the college selection process, often functioning as the primary, or exclusive, information source for international students evaluating foreign institutions (James-MacEachern & Yun, 2017). This intensified student scrutiny further compels institutions to prioritize high-ranking positions as a prerequisite for global competitiveness.

Employing document analysis and a narrative review, this brief identifies a global "ranking rush" defined by methodological volatility and hypercompetitive institutional behaviors. This phenomenon is theoretically framed by the interplay between signaling theory (Spence, 1973) and Perna's (2006) college choice model. Universities act as signalers, using rankings as high-visibility proxies for latent quality to mitigate information asymmetry in cross-border education. Within Perna's (2006) framework, these signals, amplified through marketing and recruitment, shape the "higher education context", wherein international students

utilize rankings to minimize risk and maximize social capital (p. 117). Ultimately, this creates a self-reinforcing feedback loop: institutions aggressively chase metrics to maintain a competitive signal, whereas international students rely on those signals as primary evidence of value.

The scholarly contribution of this research is its critical reframing of global university rankings through the lens of international student choice, addressing the structural misalignment between research-intensive metrics and the multifaceted needs of global cohorts. By interrogating the "mission drift" that compromises institutional integrity, this work advocates for a more nuanced evaluative framework, which empowers stakeholders to prioritize mission-aligned objectives and diverse pedagogical requirements over aggregate prestige.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Institutional rankings provide significant strategic advantages, particularly for elite institutions, by facilitating resource acquisition and financial growth through increased tuition revenue, research grants, and philanthropic support (Kim, 2018). As transparency tools, rankings bolster institutional reputation, legitimacy, and admission outcomes (Shin & Toutkoushian, 2011). For instance, a single-rank improvement in USNWR correlates with a 1% increase in application volume (Luca & Smith, 2013). Beyond external prestige, administrators utilize these metrics internally to drive strategic planning and institutional vitality. This competitive pressure serves as a catalyst for continuous improvement, as even suboptimal rankings can motivate institutions to modernize curricula and launch innovative academic programs (Shin & Toutkoushian, 2011).

While the pursuit of higher rankings offers implicit institutional advantages, the widespread "ranking rush" has introduced several critical concerns that warrant rigorous scrutiny. The analysis critiques the phenomenon across four primary dimensions: the applicability of various ranking criteria, methodological volatility and reliability, the escalation of unhealthy competition, and the systemic limitations in accommodating diverse student bodies.

First, a comparative analysis of the four preeminent ranking systems reveals significant methodological heterogeneity but confirms a collective bias toward elite academic output and reputational prestige. To facilitate this comparison, individual indicators were mapped into six conceptually distinct dimensions on the basis of current ranking methodologies (QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2025; ShanghaiRanking Consultancy, n.d.; THE, 2025; USNWR, 2025): (1) Expert & Employer Reputation, capturing subjective prestige among academics and industry leaders; (2) Teaching & Learning Environment, assessing institutional capacity and faculty-to-student metrics; (3) Research Output Volume & Resources, measuring publication volume and funding; (4) Research Quality & Citation Impact, reflecting scholarly influence and significance; (5) Global Engagement & Internationalization, evaluating cross-border collaboration and diversity; and (6) Specific Outcomes & Knowledge Transfer, measuring societal impact and industry utility. This framework enables a multidimensional assessment by aggregating weighted indicators into coherent thematic domains.

The detailed coding scheme and metric weights are provided in the Appendix (Table 2), while Table 1 presents the standardized categorical weights derived from this cross-comparison.

Table 1: Standardized Categories and Weights of Major Ranking Agencies

No.	Standardized Categories	Aggregated Weight (%)			
		QS	THE	ARWU	US News BGU
1	Expert & Employer Reputation	45.0%	33.0%	0.0%	25.0%
2	Teaching & Learning Environment	10.0%	14.5%	10.0%	0.0%
3	Research Output Volume & Resources	0.0%	11.0%	20.0%	15.0%
4	Research Quality & Citation Impact	20.0%	30.0%	70.0%	50.0%
5	Global Engagement & Internationalization	15.0%	7.5%	0.0%	10.0%
6	Specific Outcomes & Knowledge Transfer	10.0%	4.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	Total Weight	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

While global ranking agencies exhibit distinct methodological philosophies, they converge in prioritizing institutional prestige over student-centered outcomes. ARWU (n.d.) presents the most narrowly defined framework, focusing almost exclusively on research performance (90%) and offering a metric of scholarly productivity rather than a holistic assessment of university function. Conversely, QS (2025) assigns the highest weights to reputation (45%) and internationalization (15%), emphasizing institutional visibility and global reach. THE (2025) provides a more balanced approach, with a relatively equitable distribution of weights across research, teaching, and reputation to assess core academic activities. Despite these divergent focal points, all four systems share a common structural limitation: a pervasive deemphasis on specific student outcomes and knowledge transfer. This suggests a collective prioritization of established research stature and perceived prestige over practical measures of institutional output.

As demonstrated in Tables 1 and 2, the methodological heterogeneity of global university rankings precludes direct cross-system comparisons without explicit weighting conversions (QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2025; ShanghaiRanking Consultancy, n.d.; THE, 2025; USNWR, 2025). Consequently, simultaneous top-tier placement remains restricted to a narrow elite cohort, such as the U.S. Ivy League or the U.K. "G5" universities. This divergence in weighting necessitates strategically tailored resource allocation. For example, institutions targeting the ARWU must prioritize investment in elite research output, whereas those prioritizing the QS must emphasize internationalization and reputational management. Furthermore, the proliferation of new ranking systems annually complicates the identification of a single authoritative index. This "ranking

inflation" suggests that high performance within a single system yields diminished salience compared with the prestige signaled by consistent, multisystem success.

Methodological instability further undermines the reliability of these indices, as frequent revisions can trigger substantial rank fluctuations independent of actual institutional performance. Stella and Woodhouse (2006) reported that historical shifts in USNWR methodologies allowed certain institutions to ascend in rank without corresponding improvements in educational quality. Such volatility suggests that ranking movements may reflect technical adjustments in weighting rather than substantive institutional evolution, fuelling skepticism regarding the longitudinal reliability of global ranking systems.

Second, the methodological integrity of university rankings is fundamentally undermined by a reliance on unverified, self-reported data and systemic commercial pressures. Major ranking bodies utilize disparate, often subjective, metrics: USNWR utilizes university-supplied data alongside Clarivate's research analytics (USNWR, 2025); ARWU prioritizes bibliometric indicators (ShanghaiRanking Consultancy, n.d.); QS emphasizes reputational surveys (QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2025); and THE incorporates self-reported data across multiple performance pillars (THE, 2025). Such structures incentivize strategic manipulation, including the recalibration of admissions and graduation standards, to optimize metric performance (Shin & Toutkoushian, 2011). Reliability is further eroded by inconsistent treatments of missing data and a reductionist focus on "measurable" indicators that obscure nuanced institutional characteristics (Stella & Woodhouse, 2006). These weaknesses are compounded by a commercial "drama" cycle in which publishers prioritize volatile annual shifts to drive readership over substantive institutional evolution. This cycle underscores the precarious power dynamics between ranking agencies and universities, characterized by profit-driven motivations and inherent data-submission asymmetries.

Third, excessive reliance on rankings instigates a resource-intensive "academic arms race". Universities prioritize metrics such as external funding, and philanthropy increasingly depends on status hierarchies, whereas governments utilize global tables as benchmarks for knowledge-economy competitiveness. Internally, behavior is distorted by executive incentives and a psychological reactivity that compels administrators to employ gaming strategies to align institutional standing with professional self-image (Bastedo & Bowman, 2011). This pressure forces a strategic redirection of resources, prioritizing bibliometric output over pedagogical quality and escalating expenditures on nonacademic amenities (Kim, 2018). As Stella and Woodhouse (2006) posited, a critical opportunity cost of this race is the erosion of interinstitutional cooperation. Ultimately, this dynamic exacerbates systemic inequality, marginalizing vulnerable students by restricting access, narrowing choice, and diminishing socioeconomic opportunity.

Finally, existing ranking metrics exhibit a profound misalignment with the lived expectations of both domestic and international students. A critical omission is the failure to directly measure essential support factors such as educational quality, cultural inclusivity, and student services. While QS and THE may

marginalize domestic interests by overweighting internationalization metrics at the expense of local educational quality, ARWU and US News BGU disadvantage international students by prioritizing elite research outputs, such as Nobel laureates and citation impact, which signals institutional prestige but obscures the practical student experience and social capital development.

Furthermore, several indicators lack applicability for diverse student segments. For example, ARWU research intensity offers little utility for applicants prioritizing undergraduate teaching and faculty interaction. Similarly, by omitting metrics for nontraditional-aged groups, the USNWR prevents these cohorts from gauging institutional support. Most critically, superficial measures such as the QS international student ratio fail to capture the qualitative reality of inclusivity. Consequently, international students remain a vulnerable group and are forced to make high-stakes enrollment decisions without reliable data regarding the genuine campus environment.

CONCLUSION AND INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGIES

The analysis of the global ranking phenomenon emphasizes a critical imperative for HEIs to adopt a rational, mission-centric approach to external metrics. Evidence demonstrating a pervasive academic reputation arms race, coupled with systemic methodological limitations and questionable metric validity, suggests that a blind pursuit of excellence compels resource misallocation while failing to capture the core educational quality. Given that methodologies often deemphasize student outcomes, a rational institutional response requires prioritizing strategies aligned with long-term social mandates over low-impact efforts focused on marginal score gains.

The inherent methodological heterogeneity and collective research bias of ranking systems necessitate two strategic shifts for institutional leadership. First, HEIs must reclaim mission primacy by utilizing rankings strictly as diagnostic benchmarks for self-defined goals rather than allowing external scores to dictate institutional identity. To operationalize this, institutions should adopt objectives and key results (OKRs) and evaluation frameworks that transcend traditional metrics by prioritizing socioeconomic equity, longitudinal learning gains, diversity, and value-based postgraduate outcomes.

Second, governance must be tailored to the institutional type. Research-intensive and private universities should establish oversight structures to mitigate "mission drift" driven by elite donors or board expectations. Conversely, public and regional institutions should employ transparent communication to frame rankings as limited heuristics rather than holistic measures of value. By aligning external pressures, such as political demands and status-driven funding, with internal frameworks prioritizing affordability and regional impact, institutions can leverage rankings for visibility without compromising foundational educational mandates.

Ultimately, this study necessitates a strategic shift in external communication, particularly regarding global recruitment. Universities must adopt transparency with international students regarding ranking limitations and

the specific metrics that influence their standing. As international applicants increasingly prioritize safety, employability, and return on investment amidst geopolitical volatility, institutions must transition from score-based marketing to cultivating a relational reputation. This transition requires leveraging global alumni networks and deploying staff with advanced intercultural communication expertise. Institutional messaging should proactively emphasize student well-being and financial transparency to articulate institutional "fit" beyond aggregate ranking figures.

AI Use Statement

The author used generative AI tools (e.g., Google Gemini) to support the language refinement stage of this manuscript. All academic content, citations, and interpretations were created and verified by the author.

Reference Integrity Statement

All in-text citations match the reference list, and all references are accurate, verifiable, and checked for valid DOIs or URLs.

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Table 2: Coding Scheme, Category, and Weights of Four Ranking Agencies

No·	Coding Scheme	Ranking Agency	Category	Indicator	Weighting
1	Expert & Employer Reputation	QS	Employability and Outcomes	Employer Reputation	15.0%
			Research and Discovery	Academic Reputation	30.0%
		THE	Research Environment	Research Reputation	18.0%
			Teaching	Teaching Reputation	15.0%
		US News GBU	Global research reputation		12.5%
			Regional research reputation		12.5%
2	Teaching & Learning Environment	ARWU	Per Capita Performance	Per capita academic performance of an institution	10.0%
		QS	Learning Experience	Faculty Student Ratio	10.0%
				Student Staff Ratio	4.5%
				Doctorate Bachelor Ratio	2.0%
				Doctorate Staff ratio	5.5%
				Institutional Income	2.5%
3	Research Output Volume & Resources	ARWU	Research Output	Papers published in Nature and Science	20.0%
		THE	Research Environment	Research Income	5.5%
				Research Productivity	5.5%
		US News GBU	Books		2.5%
			Conferences		2.5%
			Number of highly cited papers that are among the top 1% most cited in their respective field		5.0%
			Percentage of total publications that are among the top 1% most highly cited papers		5.0%
			Publications		10.0%
4	Research Quality & Citation Impact	ARWU	Quality of Education	Alumni of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals	10.0%
			Quality of Faculty	Staff of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals	20.0%
				Highly Cited Researchers	20.0%
			Research Output	Papers indexed in Science Citation Index-Expanded and Social Science Citation Index (Web of Science)	20.0%
		QS	Research and Discovery	Citations per Faculty	20.0%
		THE	Research Quality	Citation Impact	15.0%
				Research Strength	5.0%
				Research Excellence	5.0%
				Research Influence	5.0%
		US News GBU	Normalized citation impact		10.0%
			Number of publications that are among the 10% most cited		12.5%
			Percentage of total publications that are among the 10% most cited		10.0%
			Total citations		7.5%
5	Global Engagement & Internationalization	QS	Global Engagement	International Faculty Ratio	5.0%
				International Research Network	5.0%
				International Student Diversity	0.0%
				International Student Ratio	5.0%
		THE	International outlook	International Students	2.5%
				International Staff	2.5%
				International Co-authorship	2.5%
				Studying Abroad	0.0%
		US News GBU	International collaboration		5.0%
			International collaboration–relative to country		5.0%
6	Specific Outcomes & Knowledge Transfer	QS	Employability and Outcomes	Employment Outcomes	5.0%
			Sustainability	Sustainability	5.0%
		THE	Industry	Industry income	2.0%
				Patents	2.0%