Influence of University Rankings on Institutions:

Ethics, Controversies, and Competition

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Chapter 1
Do Universities Need Rankings? Rethinking Biases, Transparency, and Alternative Models 1
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Hassiba Almi, Badji Mokhtar- Annaba University, Algeria

University rankings have faced significant criticism due to their lack of transparency, potential for data manipulation, and methodological biases that prioritize research output over teaching quality, student experience, and societal impact. These rankings often overlook non-Western institutions and create conflicts of interest, as ranking agencies also offer consulting services to universities. Qualitative methods suggest that reform proposals include increasing transparency, introducing independent auditing, and diversifying metrics to encompass teaching quality, regional contributions, and societal impact. Alternative models, such as the Balanced Scorecard and context-sensitive frameworks, offer a more comprehensive evaluation of higher education, emphasizing equity, diversity, and a well-rounded assessment of teaching, research, and impact.

Chapter 2
The Debate Over the Objectivity of University Rankings 33
Marley Woods, School of Business Administration in Higher Education, Brazil

This chapter interrogates the long-standing claim of objectivity within global university ranking systems, revealing the ideological and methodological biases embedded in their design. While rankings present themselves as neutral evaluators of academic excellence, they often privilege Western-centric values, reinforce institutional hierarchies, and ignore local context. By examining the construction and use of ranking indicators, the chapter critiques the assumption that quality in higher education can be universally quantified. It also explores how these rankings shape institutional behavior, funding priorities, and academic cultures, often to the detriment of diversity and equity. Special attention is given to the marginalization of institutions in the Global South, whose realities are frequently misrepresented or excluded. The chapter concludes by calling for more reflexive, transparent, and

inclusive frameworks that move beyond superficial metrics and engage with the complex, pluralistic nature of academic excellence.

Chapter 3

Are University Rankings Fueling Academic Elitism? 55
Marley Woods, School of Business Administration in Higher Education, Brazil

University rankings have become powerful gatekeepers of prestige, often shaping funding, student choices, and policy decisions. Yet, beneath their polished metrics lies a growing concern: are these rankings reinforcing academic elitism and widening the gap between privileged institutions and the rest? This chapter examines how global ranking systems, while claiming to promote excellence, may inadvertently entrench inequality, marginalize emerging universities, and overlook contextually valuable contributions. By unpacking the mechanisms through which rankings elevate a select few while creating barriers for others, the chapter invites a critical conversation about fairness, diversity, and the true purpose of higher education. It calls for a rethinking of how we measure quality—not by conformity to narrow indicators, but by embracing a broader, more equitable vision of academic excellence.

Chapter 4

When Numbers Replace Knowledge: The West, the Rest, and the Ranking in Global Higher Education 77
Keerthiraj, GFGC Punjalakatte, Mangalore University, India
Apoorva Misra, Alliance University, India

The contemporary belief in global university rankings rests on an unnoticed presupposition: that institutions of higher learning can be evaluated, compared, and ordered according to universally applicable criteria. This chapter sets out to show that such a presupposition is not a neutral or objective truth, but the product of a specifically European experience of knowledge and education. Ranking—as a practice—presupposes that knowledge is measurable, institutions are comparable, and excellence is a position on a scale. These assumptions, however, are not shared across civilizations. The chapter argues that the logic of ranking is intelligible only within the cognitive framework that emerged in Europe, one that equated knowledge with textuality, formality, and institutional hierarchy. This chapter interrogates the very idea that academic value can be captured by metrics. In doing so, it points toward the possibility of alternative modes of valuing knowledge, rooted not in universal standards, but in the plural experiences of learning across cultures.

Chapter 5
How Rankings Reinforce or Challenge Academic Colonialism 113
Casey S. Johnson, Lansdale School of Business, USA

This chapter challenges the conventional wisdom that equates university excellence with ranking position. In a landscape increasingly driven by numerical performance indicators, many institutions lose sight of their deeper mission and societal responsibilities. Instead of chasing metrics, this work argues for a broader definition of success—one rooted in intellectual freedom, community engagement, ethical leadership, and transformative education. Drawing on global case studies and reflective analysis, the chapter proposes a framework for universities to thrive authentically by aligning strategy with values. Excellence, it contends, is not a race to the top but a commitment to meaning, purpose, and enduring relevance.

Chapter 6
How Rankings Impact Academic Freedom and Institutional Autonomy 135
Christopher Bohlens, Leuphana University, Lüneburg, Germany

This chapter examines how global university rankings impact academic freedom and institutional autonomy in higher education. Despite their growing influence, rankings create tensions with core academic values through their methodology, which emphasizes research output over teaching quality and neglects academic freedom measures. The analysis reveals how the pursuit of higher rankings affects research priorities, teaching practices, and administrative decision-making across different regions and institutional contexts. Rankings often promote a homogenized model of excellence that can lead to mission drift and convergence of institutional identities. While established universities in resource-rich environments may better withstand ranking pressures, institutions in the Global South face particular challenges in balancing international metrics with local needs. The chapter concludes with actionable recommendations for universities, ranking organizations, and policymakers to preserve academic values while engaging with global comparisons.

Chapter 7
The Academic Competition Through Academic Rankings 169
Mustafa Kayyali, Maaref University of Applied Sciences, Syria

This chapter explores how global university rankings have transformed higher education into a field of intense academic competition. Institutions across the world now strive to climb league tables, often restructuring priorities and reshaping policies to align with ranking indicators. While these systems have arguably enhanced transparency and accountability, they have also contributed to homogenization, increased pressure, and inequitable comparisons. Drawing on a critical lens, the chapter examines how universities interpret and respond to rankings, and what is

gained—or lost—in the pursuit of status. It invites a deeper reflection on whether current ranking mechanisms truly capture the richness and diversity of academic excellence or simply reinforce a narrow definition of success.

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Fransisco Chindongo Ntjamba, University of Namibia, Namibia
Daniel Opotamutale Ashipala, Univeristy of Namibia, Namibia

Global university rankings possess a significant impact on institutional strategies, student choices, and higher education legislation. Although they are frequently viewed as tools for monitoring and fostering high standards, their dependence on narrow performance metrics like as research output, citation frequency, and global reputation can distort institutional objectives. Institutions may find themselves concentrating more on satisfying market needs as competition intensifies rather than adhering to their core social and educational objectives. Many educational principles may be undermined by the growing emphasis on quantifiable outcomes, which reduces intricate intellectual pursuits to simple metrics. This chapter aims to explore the need for structural changes and ethical reconsiderations of global university rankings to better reflect academic honesty, inclusivity, and the core values of higher education.

Chapter 9
The Influence of Rankings on the Mental Health of Instructional Staff and Students 215
Rupayan Roy, Department of Fashion Technology, National Institute of Fashion Technology, Kannur, India
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Rankings in higher education have become an essential tool for evaluating institutions, programs, and individuals. Their function as a mentor for prospective students and faculty is occasionally underestimated regarding psychological impact. This chapter analyzes the psychological effects of rankings on students and instructors, highlighting motivation, stress, and mental health. It analyzes the influence of rankings on students' academic aspirations and self-esteem, as well as the pressures they place on instructors about career progression and performance. The chapter analyzes the psychological consequences while highlighting the institutional viewpoint, exploring the impact of rankings on resource distribution and institutional decision-making. Furthermore, it analyzes coping mechanisms and support techniques to alleviate

the negative effects. The chapter concludes with considerations regarding the future of rankings in higher education and their capacity to foster a more inclusive and holistic academic atmosphere.

Chapter 10
The Weight of Numbers: Examining the Psychological Toll of Rankings on Academic Stakeholders 245
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Zhang Suyan, Shandong Jianzhu University, China
Nurul Ain Chua Binti Abdullah, University Terengganu Malaysia, Malaysia
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This chapter explores the profound psychological impact of institutional and individual rankings on students and faculty within higher education. While rankings are often presented as objective measures of quality and performance, they can generate significant stress, anxiety, and distorted perceptions of self-worth. This chapter will delve into the specific psychological mechanisms through which rankings influence academic stakeholders, including the effects on self-esteem, motivation, mental health, and academic integrity. We will examine the pressures associated with achieving and maintaining high rankings, the role of social comparison and perceived competition, and the potential for rankings to exacerbate existing inequalities. Furthermore, we will discuss strategies for mitigating the negative psychological consequences of rankings and fostering a more balanced and holistic approach to evaluating academic achievement.

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Preface

Every few months, a fresh league table drops and the academic world holds its breath for a moment too long. A handful of places up or down, and budgets twitch, strategies pivot, morale tilts. Numbers—neat, single-file, seemingly neutral—do an outsized job of telling stories about sprawling, contradictory, living institutions. They compress the work of thousands into a tidy integer and ask us to believe the compression. And yet, even as we bristle, we check the charts again. This book steps into that volatile space—half mirror, half megaphone—where rankings don't just describe higher education but quietly (and sometimes loudly) redirect it.

The impulse to rank is older than the instruments that now dominate it. Human beings stack and sort to make sense of messy realities. Nothing wrong with that—until a tool ossifies into a worldview. In higher education, the rankings industry has grown into a weather system: it shapes reputations, bends incentives, and redistributes resources; it can also narrow the possible futures of institutions that do not fit the preferred mold. The result is a global dialogue increasingly conducted in the grammar of indicators and weightings, where the texture of mission and place often gets peeled away.

And yet, dismissing rankings outright would simplify a complicated story. They have helped surface long-ignored questions about accountability, comparability, and the public understanding of institutional quality. They can prod a complacent sector. Still, the central tension remains: once a table claims to be "the map," campuses begin to fold themselves to fit it. The stakes are high, and not only for managers. Students and faculty internalize rank as fate; ministries make consequential bets on the basis of annual movements measured to the decimal; editors and advertisers spin the spectacle into a cycle of visibility that feeds itself.

The essays gathered here wrestle with all of that—and then some. They do not speak with one voice, and they shouldn't. They pressure-test the ethics of measurement and the politics of prestige; they examine how rankings travel across cultures; they scrutinize the consequences for academic freedom, mental health, and equity.

They also sketch alternatives: different logics of value, different ways of listening to what a university is for.

What follows is a road map through the volume, chapter by chapter. The discussion is intentionally textured—at moments argumentative, at others reflective—because the subject refuses clean edges. If a preface has a job, it is to invite readers into a conversation already in motion, with enough signposts to wander productively and enough provocation to keep you from getting comfortable.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Chapter 1: *Do Universities Need Rankings? Rethinking Biases, Transparency, and Alternative Models*

Raed Awashreh and Hassiba Almi

The opening chapter presses on the first, almost impolite question: do we, in fact, need rankings? The authors map how the metricization of reputation can distort institutional priorities, encourage corner-cutting, and usher in a low-grade culture of optimization that edges out judgment. They trace patterns of bias baked into familiar indicators and call for disclosure regimes and plural frameworks that can accommodate mission diversity rather than punishing it. The argument is not to torch the thermometers, but to insist that we stop confusing them with the weather.

Chapter 2: *The Debate Over the Objectivity of University Rankings*

Marley Woods

Here the mask of neutrality is peeled back. Woods dissects the aura of "objectivity" that often surrounds ranking systems, showing how methodological choices—what to count, how to weight, whom to ask—are never merely technical. Reputation surveys amplify incumbents; citation metrics privilege a narrow slice of disciplinary life; composite scores smuggle in value judgments under the flag of science. The conclusion is measured but firm: objectivity, if it exists here at all, must be practiced as transparency and contestation, not claimed as a marketing slogan.

Chapter 3: *Are University Rankings Fueling Academic Elitism?*

Marley Woods

Picking up where the previous essay leaves off, Woods tracks how rankings consolidate prestige into a high-altitude club, pulling attention and resources toward a small archipelago of "world-class" institutions while rendering the rest as

scenery. The chapter details the isomorphic pressure to imitate elite models, the feedback loops that reward incumbency, and the subtle ways a ranking lens recasts what counts as knowledge in the first place. The question isn't whether excellence exists; it's whether the system's picture of excellence is too thin, too homogeneous, too forgetful of context.

Chapter 4: *When Numbers Replace Knowledge: The West, the Rest, and the Ranking in Global Higher Education*

Keerthiraj and Apoorva Misra

With a sharp, comparative eye, this chapter examines the asymmetries that arise when a single, standardized template meets plural academic worlds. The authors unpack how ranking categories—born in particular institutional histories—travel outward and take on the force of universal benchmarks. The cost is cultural: local priorities, regional languages, and community-anchored forms of scholarship get crowded out by the grammar of what is countable at scale. The provocation lands: beware a system that calls itself "global" while wearing the clothes of somewhere very specific.

Chapter 5: *How Rankings Reinforce or Challenge Academic Colonialism*

Casey S. Johnson

Johnson pushes the critique further, asking whether rankings risk reenacting older hierarchies under a new managerial sheen. Through case-driven analysis, the chapter shows how institutions in the Global South, community-serving universities, and practice-oriented colleges are often evaluated against ideals they did not author. Yet the argument is double-edged: rankings can also be repurposed—used tactically to assert visibility, to pressure funders, to reframe what quality might mean in place. The takeaway is not cynicism but strategy: name the power in the metrics, then learn how to bend them without being bent out of shape.

Chapter 6: *How Rankings Impact Academic Freedom and Institutional Autonomy*

Christopher Bohlens

Even when well-intentioned, rankings tug at the deep wiring of the university. Bohlens tracks the "ranking paradox": the more the sector critiques the tables, the more authority those tables seem to accrue. He catalogs the downstream effects—mission drift, the quiet standardization of research agendas, managerial overreach

dressed as "excellence"—and shows how both academic freedom and institutional autonomy can thin out under indicator pressure. The chapter ends with practical guardrails for leaders and policy-makers determined to engage comparative systems while protecting the space to think otherwise.

Chapter 7: *The Academic Competition through Academic Rankings*

Mustafa Kayyali

Competition, the oxygen of rankings, gets a grounded treatment here. Kayyali reconstructs the shift from modest benchmarking to a full-blown prestige economy: strategic plans recalibrated to match metrics, recruitment and mobility synchronized with annual releases, brand architectures built around position rather than purpose. The piece refuses caricature—competition can sharpen performance—but it also cautions against allowing an external calculus to write an institution's inner narrative. The real work is aligning ambition with mission, not chasing a moving target because everyone else is running.

Chapter 8: *The Ethical Implications of Global University Rankings in Balancing Competition and Educational Integrity*

Fransisco Chindongo Ntjamba and Daniel Opotamutale Ashipala

Here ethics steps into the spotlight. The authors parse how a fixation on rank can reroute institutional energies—toward publicity maneuvers, toward cosmetic internationalization, toward research quantity over learning quality. They argue for structural reforms that place integrity, inclusion, and educative purpose back at the center of the scoreboard. It is a call to redesign the incentives so that doing the right thing and doing well are not put at odds by the algorithm.

Chapter 9: *The Influence of Rankings on the Mental Health of Instructional Staff and Students*

Rupayan Roy, Vyshnavi Padamata, and Vaishnavi Bhamburkar

Rankings seep into the bloodstream of campus life. This chapter makes the human costs vivid: performance anxiety in a permanent key, students calibrating self-worth against institutional brand, faculty chasing outputs at the expense of rest and risk-taking, administrators absorbing the whiplash of annual comparison. The authors also sketch coping infrastructures—peer support, mentoring that decouples identity from metrics, governance that dampens rather than amplifies volatility. The point is personal and systemic: well-being is not a soft add-on; it is an ethical obligation in an age of constant measurement.

Chapter 10: *The Weight of Numbers: Examining the Psychological Toll of Rankings on Academic Stakeholders*

Goh Ying Yingsoon, Liu Wenpang, Zhang Suyan, Nurul Ain Chua Binti Abdullah, and Nurul Ajleaa Abdul Rahman

The final chapter you'll encounter moves from institutions to individuals and back again, mapping the psychological mechanisms that rankings trigger and the behaviors they invite. Social comparison theory hums beneath the surface; imposter feelings metastasize when external numbers become internal mirrors; ethical compromises tempt when careers ride on quantifiable outputs. But the authors do not stop at diagnosis. They propose counter-weights—local cultures of care, plural notions of merit, evaluation ecologies that widen what "good work" looks like—so that achievement need not be a synonym for attrition.

What ties these chapters together?

Several threads coil through the volume.

First, the mismatch between complexity and compression. A university is a million acts—teaching, mentoring, discovery, repair—performed under constraints that differ wildly across place and mission. The act of compressing that into a single rank will always leave casualties. The contributors refuse the temptation to tidy: you will find attention to histories, to geographies, to institutional biographies that do not read like anyone else's. That refusal is a kind of ethics.

Second, the political economy of prestige. Rankings do not float above the world; they shape and are shaped by it. Media amplifies; policy codifies; markets respond. Competition can catalyze improvement, but it also concentrates visibility and turns attention into advantage. Several chapters show how the "race to the top" revisits old hierarchies with new tools—and how those tools can be contested, repurposed, or replaced.

Third, the tug-of-war between accountability and autonomy. Comparative information matters; so does the capacity of institutions to set their own terms of excellence in dialogue with their communities. When rankings begin to dictate form and content, we inch toward a monoculture—efficient, legible, and dull. Protecting academic freedom and organizational self-determination is not an indulgence in this context; it is a precondition for diverse, resilient systems.

Fourth, an ethics of care—toward people and purposes. Numbers can be clarifying; they can also be cruel. Students and staff live with the consequences in bodies and schedules. Institutions drift when optics outrun mission. Several authors propose ways to tilt the system back: disclose methods, diversify indicators, weight teaching and inclusion with seriousness, build multi-dimensional profiles that resist totalizing scores, and cultivate internal dashboards accountable to values rather than vanity.

Finally, method as message. The tools we use to evaluate are never neutral; they broadcast a theory of what matters. A ranking that privileges citations tells the world that certain forms of knowledge count more than others; one that overvalues brand extends past success into future credit. Reimagining method—through transparency, participatory design, and context-sensitive metrics—is part of reimagining higher education itself. If you change the yardstick, you change the stride.

What should readers carry forward?

Perhaps a simple caution and a stubborn hope.

The caution: when numbers recruit our imaginations, they can shrink them. A high rank can hypnotize a campus into mistaking the loudest story about itself for the truest one. A low rank can smuggle shame into classrooms where excellent teaching happens every day. Either way, the conversation narrows to movement in a table, while the work—formative, slow, communal—keeps happening offstage.

The hope: instruments can be redesigned, and cultures can be nudged toward better questions. One can imagine comparative systems that respect heterogeneity, that publish their uncertainty, that amplify teaching and inclusion with the same seriousness we currently reserve for research volume and reputation polling. One can imagine institutions that report not only what they achieved, but what they refused to sacrifice to achieve it. And one can imagine ministries, funders, and media learning to relish complexity, or at least to stop punishing it.

This volume won't settle the rankings debate; it may deepen it. Good. These are not problems to be solved once but practices to be sustained: of scrutiny, of self-definition, of aligning means with ends. If the chapters occasionally pull in different directions, that pluralism is by design. A sector as variegated as higher education deserves more than a single ladder. It deserves a forest of paths, some broad, some narrow, many intersecting, none compulsory.

A final note to the reader making decisions with limited time: keep asking what the indicator is not showing. Whose labor and learning are absent from this picture? Which values do we risk obscuring by giving this metric the microphone? When you find yourself hooked by the drama of annual rises and falls, recall that rank is an afterimage, not the light itself.

If the book leaves you slightly dissatisfied with easy answers and strangely energized to re-argue the terms—that's the right mood. Let the discomfort do its work. Let it invite institutional courage. Let it embolden experiments that look sideways at the table and then get on with the business of education: not spectacle, not scarcity games, but the daily making of capacity, judgment, and common purpose.

Welcome to the argument. Take your time. Bring your own measures.

Mustafa Kayyali
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Acknowledgement

"Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." — Lao Tzu

Books are, at heart, apprenticeships. Someone shows you where the nets are kept, how to read the water, when to pull and when to wait, how to repair what frays. This volume—*Influence of University Rankings on Institutions: Ethics, Controversies, and Competition*—was taught into existence by a community that understands the deeper promise of education: not the quick meal, but the lifelong capacity to nourish others. What follows is my attempt to honor that community.

First, to the publishing home of this work: IGI Global. Thank you for believing that a book about the ethics and politics of measurement belongs on the same shelf as the handbooks of methods that inspired it. Editing, peer review, production schedules, careful proofreading—these are not side notes to scholarship; they are the craft that makes it legible. Your team asked sharp questions, protected rigor when it would have been easier to hurry, and created the conditions where contributors from multiple continents could be heard clearly and fairly. That stewardship matters, and it shows on every page.

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Maaref University of Applied Sciences, Syria, offered more than an affiliation; it extended a canopy under which this work could grow. "Academic cover" sounds

administrative, yet in practice it meant room to think, permission to convene, time to draft and redraft, and the patience to let ideas arrive at their natural pace. Thank you for trusting the slow rhythms of careful scholarship and for letting this book take the shape it needed rather than the shape a calendar prefers.

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To HE Higher Education Ranking, and the wide community around it, thank you for the *wide prospects* you have opened: debates where transparency isn't treated as an inconvenience, experiments that try to reconcile social impact with methodological toughness, and a culture that welcomes critique without spiraling into cynicism. Your forums, workshops, and persistent questions shaped the sensibility of this volume—curious, constructive, and unwilling to pretend that one number can hold an institution's soul.

Now, to the writers who trusted this enterprise with their best work: to all authors and co-authors, I owe more than a line. You carried the heart of the argument, each of you in your own register. Some chapters arrived as whispers that became sturdier with each revision; others came roaring in and asked to be trimmed until the argument could breathe. You were generous with time and generous with ego—willing to cut what didn't serve, willing to sharpen where the claim deserved to stand. Most of all, you were brave enough to say things plainly in a field that can sometimes hide behind polite abstractions. Thank you for your *trust in the project* and for the fidelity you kept to evidence, even when the evidence complicated a neat conclusion.

Peer reviewers—named and anonymous—saved us from ourselves. You caught the claim that outpaced its data, the paragraph where passion outran clarity, the table that needed a legend and, truth be told, a re-think. The best criticism doesn't

bruise; it strengthens. Yours did. The integrity of this volume owes much to your careful eyes and principled voices.

Behind the scenes, a cast of quiet professionals kept failure at bay. Librarians found obscure sources behind paywalls; data specialists verified figures and, on more than one occasion, coaxed a reluctant dataset into coherence; IT teams revived a backup that chose a bad evening to become temperamental. None of this shows up in a citation, yet all of it shows up in the readability of the work. Thank you for saving hours that would otherwise have been lost to technical entropy.

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I could stop here and this would already be a long ledger of thanks. But the scaffolding of a book is completed, finally, at home. If this volume sounds patient rather than frantic, if it keeps returning to people rather than merely to positions and policies, that's because it was given the rare gift of a family that made room for it to be made well and that refused to let the work devour the worker.

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page slipping into bitterness and helped it return to candor. You noticed when an argument had become a shield and nudged it back into an invitation. I've learned that love, in the life of a long project, shows up as steadiness: meals that appear at impossible hours, a hand at the small of the back just before the hard email is sent, the grace of not asking for a conversation at the exact moment the mind has to hold a complex thing. You gave all that, with humor intact. This book carries your patience in its cadence.

To my father, *Abdullah Kayyali*, who taught me that reputation can be a kind of weather, but character is the house you build to outlast it. You didn't lecture; you modeled. I remember the way you listened—really listened—before offering an opinion; the way you measured twice and cut once; the way you kept promises that nobody would have known were broken if you hadn't kept them. Those are editorial virtues as much as ethical ones. When the subject of the book is rankings—prestige, lists, reputation—it's dangerously easy to let the language drift toward performance. Your example pulled it back. You reminded me that a university, like a person, should be judged by whether it keeps faith with those who depend on it, especially when no one is measuring that part. Thank you for a standard that doesn't move with the headlines.

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Let me return, before closing, to the center once more. Family is not simply a support system; it is a set of promises. We promise to tell the truth to one another, even when the truth is that a sentence we love is a sentence that must go. We promise to hold the calendar lightly and hold each other tightly. We promise to measure success by whether we behaved well in the making, not merely by whether the making found applause. *Noura*, you kept those promises with a kindness that has a backbone. Father, you kept them with a steadiness that never asked for credit. *Larin, Mira, Celia*, you kept them with laughter that edits pride down to size and with questions that keep meaning on the page.

In the spirit of Lao Tzu's line about teaching how to fish, I want these acknowledgements to do more than name a long list of help. I want them to mirror the pedagogy that carried us: a pedagogy of patience, of structure, of repair. When a net tore, we learned to mend. When the weather turned, we learned to read the clouds. When an argument drifted, we learned to anchor it again in the people universities exist to serve. If the book is useful, it is because the village that built it practices those arts every day.

To everyone I have named—and the many I have, inevitably, failed to name—please receive this as a public thank-you and a quiet promise: the work will try to be worthy of your trust. It will try to keep asking better questions. It will try to resist the seductions of a shiny number when a slower truth calls. It will try, most of all, to teach people how to fish: to read methods with understanding, to evaluate claims with humility, to lead institutions with courage and care.

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Chapter 1
Do Universities Need Rankings?
Rethinking Biases, Transparency, and Alternative Models

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ABSTRACT

University rankings have faced significant criticism due to their lack of transparency, potential for data manipulation, and methodological biases that prioritize research output over teaching quality, student experience, and societal impact. These rankings often overlook non-Western institutions and create conflicts of interest, as ranking agencies also offer consulting services to universities. Qualitative methods suggest that reform proposals include increasing transparency, introducing independent auditing, and diversifying metrics to encompass teaching quality, regional contributions, and societal impact. Alternative models, such as the Balanced Scorecard and context-sensitive frameworks, offer a more comprehensive evaluation of higher education, emphasizing equity, diversity, and a well-rounded assessment of teaching, research, and impact.

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INTRODUCTION

University ranking systems have become prominent tools adopted by educational institutions to evaluate and promote their national and international standing. However, rather than serving as reliable indicators of educational quality (Awashreh, 2024), these systems have increasingly been shaped by commercial and financial motivations. Most ranking agencies assign disproportionate weight to quantitative metrics—such as the number of publications and citation counts—while overlooking critical qualitative dimensions, including pedagogical effectiveness, curricular relevance (Awashreh & Al Ghunaimi, 2025b), and societal impact. As a result, rankings often fail to capture the true academic value of institutions and instead drive behaviors centered on strategic positioning, data manipulation, and institutional branding—practices that may have little to do with genuine educational development (Taylor & Braddock, 2007).

The growing commodification of university rankings has raised serious concerns regarding their neutrality, transparency, and fairness. Many ranking agencies generate substantial income through consulting services, sponsorships, and tiered participation models, introducing potential conflicts of interest (Hunter et al., 2023). Moreover, the methodologies employed by ranking organizations are often vague, inconsistently applied, and susceptible to manipulation. Criteria such as employer reputation surveys, internationalization indices, and faculty credentials are frequently assigned disproportionate influence, resulting in distorted assessments that fail to reflect the diverse missions, contexts, and contributions of universities across global regions (Fauzi et al., 2020).

This chapter critically examines the shortcomings of dominant university ranking systems, focusing on their methodological limitations, unintended consequences, and far-reaching effects on higher education. It argues that the widespread adoption of rankings has shifted institutional priorities, encouraging universities to prioritize their ranking status over the actual improvement of academic quality. This phenomenon aligns with broader patterns of academic neoliberalism, where higher education institutions increasingly adopt market-driven practices at the expense of public and educational missions.

The central aim of this study is to assess the extent to which current ranking approaches capture the quality of teaching and research excellence, and to explore alternative evaluation frameworks that offer more comprehensive, equitable, and meaningful assessments of university performance. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research question: To what extent do university ranking schemes accurately reflect educational quality and research success, and what alternative assessment models might provide more objective and context-sensitive evaluations of institutional performance?

The chapter is organized as follows: it begins by providing background on the evolution and methodology of university ranking systems, followed by a literature review that contextualizes the theoretical and empirical critiques. Next, it outlines key theoretical frameworks used to analyze ranking logic and explores the biases embedded in existing systems. Subsequent sections examine the strategic responses of universities to rankings and assess the consequences for institutional behavior and policy. Finally, the chapter proposes alternative evaluation models that emphasize inclusivity, relevance, and epistemic justice, before concluding with key implications, recommendations, and directions for future research.

RANKING BACKGROUND

University ranking systems evaluate universities based on academic performance, research output, faculty quality, internationalization, and other significant indicators. Universities voluntarily provide data to ranking agencies, which compare and contrast them at the global level. Rankings serve as a guide for students, academics, and universities to gauge the quality of higher education (Johnes, 2018). The ranking process is made on the basis of several different criteria. The academic reputation is gauged through surveys conducted among academics and professionals, analyzing teaching skills, research, and institutional reputation. Employer reputation is also quite significant, referring to the standards with which the universities prepare the students for the job market (Amado-Mateus et al., 2024).

Quality of the faculty, i.e., level of personnel, and qualification and student-to-staff ratio are also very critical factors. Academic production, in terms of numbers of publications, citations, and visibility in high-impact journals like *Nature* and *Science*, also plays a great deal into rankings. Internationalisation, in terms of international students, staff, and research collaboration, has also been an increasingly significant driving force (Shin & Lee, 2022). New model rankings place greater weight on employability outcomes and sustainability. Environmental and social responsibility of universities are ranked, and graduate employability rates are utilized as a measure of the real-world effect of education (Abo-Khalil, 2024).

Though rankings simplify comparisons for institutions of learning, there are those universities which engage in pay to play. Submission fees provide access to extended listings or more detailed reports, and survey participation fees enable institutions to take part in ranking surveys or receive targeted feedback. Advertising and promotional expenses are employed by academic institutions to enhance their rankings on official websites or engage in affiliated activities. However, highly reputed rankings like QS and Times Higher Education (THE) do not charge fees for listing; instead, they use voluntarily provided data that is publicly available (QS, 2024).

Ranking organizations finance their operations from a variety of sources of income. Private schools, institutions, and governments offer funds as well as visibility opportunities by way of revenue. Funds are also made through selling in-depth reports to enable university performance benchmarking. Consultancy services, offered by companies such as QS, offer strategic consultancy with the aim of maximizing rankings and data submission automation (Khoury et al., 2025). Premium subscription also grants users privileged access to bespoke ranking data as well as analytic reports. In addition, ranking institutions hold different events, conferences, and webinars in which universities invest to participate and showcase their achievements, often supplemented by sponsorships that support these activities. While universities might have ranking-related expenses, the organizations that compile rankings rely on a combination of revenue streams to fund their activities. Rankings, with their considerable impact, are also a contentious issue since their methodologies and business models keep shaping the global landscape of higher education (Amado-Mateus et al., 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

University rankings have become powerful metrics that influence higher education policies and institutional strategies worldwide. Originally designed to help prospective students compare universities, rankings now significantly shape institutional reputation, funding decisions, and policy-making processes (Nguyen et al., 2024). Despite their widespread application, rankings have attracted considerable criticism concerning their accuracy, methodology, and negative consequences for universities and the broader higher education ecosystem (Kayyali, 2023).

One major concern is the inconsistency across ranking systems. Most rely on narrow indicator sets, such as research productivity, faculty quality, and student satisfaction, which only partially represent university quality (Hudec, 2017). Hudec (2017) critiques these systems for applying a "one size fits all" approach that ignores important regional, cultural, and institutional differences. For example, quantitative metrics like citation counts and student-faculty ratios may obscure the true quality of education and research in contexts where raw numbers fail to capture deeper realities.

The absence of contextually relevant indicators further undermines rankings' validity. Citation-based systems, used by rankings such as QS and Times Higher Education, emphasize publication quantity over quality (Frey & Rost, 2010). This emphasis can be exploited by universities that produce large volumes of low-impact research to inflate their rankings without improving academic quality (Osterloh & Frey, 2014). For instance, research has shown that Ukrainian universities, seeking to boost their rankings, increased publication output in lower-quality journals and

conference proceedings, which did little to enhance knowledge or reputation (Hladchenko, 2025; Pinho & Diogo, 2018).

The drive for higher rankings has also caused institutions to adopt strategies that prioritize rank improvement over meaningful academic progress. Universities frequently recruit high-profile scholars, such as Nobel laureates, more for their ranking appeal than for contributing to academic excellence (Jarocka, 2015). This phenomenon reflects broader trends of academic neoliberalism, where market-driven incentives override educational and public service missions (Awashreh, 2025a). Consequently, universities may manipulate ranking criteria to advance their positions rather than focusing on sustained improvements in research and education quality.

This ranking-centric culture has been linked to the problematic shift from a "taste for science" to a "taste for publication" (Osterloh & Frey, 2014). As publication volume becomes the primary goal, scholarly integrity suffers, with researchers focusing on high-impact journals to maintain their status rather than engaging in innovative or socially meaningful scholarship. This shift threatens the fundamental role of universities as centers of knowledge creation and dissemination (Awashreh, 2025b).

Furthermore, many ranking systems overlook critical dimensions of university performance. Bergseth et al. (2014) demonstrate that different ranking systems produce widely varying results for the same institutions due to their diverse metrics and data sources, highlighting the subjective nature of rankings and their insufficiency as absolute measures of excellence (Awashreh, 2025c). The overemphasis on bibliometric indicators prioritizes research output often at the expense of teaching quality, community engagement, and student well-being (Alaşehir, 2010).

In addition, rankings tend to ignore universities' broader social responsibilities. For example, Hladchenko's (2025) study on Ukrainian universities revealed that ranking-driven publication strategies prioritized quantity over quality, which failed to meaningfully contribute to knowledge or institutional reputation (Pinho & Diogo, 2018). This illustrates the disconnect between ranking incentives and the social missions of universities.

Given these limitations, alternative evaluation methods have been proposed. Hudec (2017) advocates for replacing traditional rankings with adaptive, context-sensitive systems that incorporate intellectual capital, ongoing assessments, and long-term strategic planning. Such approaches emphasize universities' social development roles, community engagement, and educational quality rather than focusing solely on research productivity (Marginson et al., 2023).

Similarly, Frey and Rost (2010) recommend that rankings incorporate both quantitative data and qualitative expert reviews to better capture research excellence. Diversifying evaluation criteria to include teaching effectiveness, innovation, and societal impact would support more holistic institutional assessments (Păunescu et al., 2022).

While university rankings remain pervasive in shaping higher education reforms, their methodological weaknesses and unintended consequences continue to raise serious concerns. Although useful as a preliminary guide for students, rankings often misrepresent the true quality of teaching and research (Komotar, 2019). Overreliance on easily quantifiable indicators distorts universities' academic missions and fosters ranking-driven behaviors detrimental to genuine intellectual advancement. To address these issues effectively, evaluation processes must become more responsive to local contexts and institutional missions, adopting broader, more nuanced assessment frameworks. This shift would enable the development of more transparent, equitable, and meaningful university rankings (Kayyali, 2023).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

University rankings exert profound influence on the behaviors of stakeholders, strategic decision-making, and institutional reputations. They shape how universities allocate resources, develop operational strategies, and position themselves in the competitive global academic marketplace (Teixeira & Picinin, 2024). To thoroughly analyze these complex effects, this research adopts a multi-theory framework drawing on Institutional Theory (Roszkowska-Menkes, 2023), Signaling Theory (Connelly et al., 2024), and Stakeholder Theory (Bridoux & Stoelhorst, 2022). These complementary perspectives elucidate how universities respond to ranking pressures, how rankings influence external perceptions, and how ranking methodologies impact a diverse range of stakeholders.

Institutional Theory explains universities' adaptive behaviors in response to external pressures stemming from ranking systems. Governments and accreditation agencies exert coercive pressure by linking financial support and institutional prestige to ranking outcomes (Grossi et al., 2019). Concurrently, mimetic pressure drives universities to imitate the strategies and practices of highly ranked peers in efforts to enhance their own competitiveness. Normative pressures from professional networks and academic communities further reinforce expectations to conform to ranking criteria. Consequently, universities often prioritize research productivity over teaching quality and student engagement, channeling considerable resources toward publishing in indexed journals primarily to satisfy ranking metrics rather than to advance authentic knowledge creation (Daddi et al., 2021).

Signaling Theory positions rankings as key signals of university quality for principal stakeholders—including students, academics, employers, and policymakers. Due to the inherent difficulties in directly assessing educational quality, rankings serve as influential proxies. However, excessive reliance on these signals can distort decision-making processes (Connelly et al., 2024). For instance, employers may

prefer graduates from highly ranked institutions based on perceived competence, although rankings often fail to capture vital attributes such as practical skills, social competencies, or adaptability. Similarly, students may select universities largely based on international rankings without adequately considering essential factors like program content, faculty support, or career counseling that more directly impact their academic and professional success (Jongbloed et al., 2018).

Stakeholder Theory highlights the complex balancing act universities must perform to address the sometimes competing demands of multiple stakeholder groups—students, faculty, employers, government bodies, and society as a whole (Bridoux & Stoelhorst, 2022). Most current ranking systems emphasize a limited set of performance indicators, typically focusing on research output and internationalization, while neglecting other crucial dimensions. For example, institutions excelling in community engagement, pedagogical innovation, or student well-being may be undervalued if rankings prioritize research-centric metrics. This misalignment fosters tension and can exacerbate the prioritization of ranking factors at the expense of broader educational and societal missions. Therefore, developing context-sensitive, inclusive evaluation frameworks that embrace epistemic justice—recognizing and valuing diverse forms of knowledge—and resist the constraints of academic neoliberalism—the market-driven commodification of education—is essential to ensure universities remain accountable to all stakeholders, not just those served by conventional ranking measures (Kisambira et al., 2024).

METHODS

This research employs a qualitative approach that uses secondary data to examine the implicit biases in international university ranking systems and suggest new approaches to the measurement of institutional effectiveness. The method has a strong emphasis on qualitative research to elicit the complexity of university performance and establish the shortcomings of the existing ranking systems. Research process is organized into three broad phases: data collection, ranking bias test, and alternative model development. Qualitative methods, through secondary data sources, are suitable and recommended to follow, when there is no fund and difficulty in conducting surveys or interviews due to several obstacles (Cheong et al., 2023; Ruggiano & Perry, 2017) .

Data Collection

To answer the research questions, different secondary data were gathered and examined from several sources, such as scholarly literature, available ranking

databases, and relevant reports. The data collection phase commenced with a thorough literature review, wherein an extensive analysis of scholarly articles, books, and reports was performed to ascertain prevalent criticisms concerning university rankings. This investigation included an examination of biases associated with Western-centric metrics, the manipulation of data, and issues regarding transparency. The review concentrated on the main sources that elaborated on university ranking methodologies, the effects of rankings on universities, and alternative models for

Analysis of Ranking Biases

The second phase of the methodology was concerned with the biases in current ranking systems' identification and analysis. This aim was attained by using a two-pronged approach. First, there was a qualitative literature review in addition to an analysis of secondary sources. This entailed the thematic analysis of secondary data obtained from academic journals, reports, and other sources. The goal here was to search for underlying motifs on the implied weaknesses and innate biases of present ranking mechanisms.

Evolution of Alternative Structures

The final stage of the study focused on the development of alternative models to university efficacy measurement that overcome the limitations of traditional ranking techniques. With the aim of accomplishing this objective, research began with a comprehensive exploration of potential alternative models. This phase involved the scrutinization of existing frameworks such as the application of the Balanced Scorecard (BSC) to Higher Education, multi-dimensional ranking frameworks such as U-Multirank, and context-sensitive models. Comparative analysis was performed to disclose strengths and weaknesses of each model, offering insights on potential areas for improvement for evaluation processes.

In light of the evidence from this review, the study moved to provide recommendations for reforming university rankings. Informed by the literature review and examination of current ranking practices, the research formulated a set of policy recommendations aimed at enhancing the equity and transparency of university rankings. The criteria set highlighted the importance of following a series of steps, making independent evaluations of data, and gaining a better insight into the special role played by universities based in developing countries. With the determination of these vital determinants, the research aspires to provide a broader and fairer framework for the measurement of university performance.

Data Analysis

Analysis of data utilized qualitative techniques that attempted to attain deep insights into issues in question, following thematic coding that had been conducted on second-level data obtained from ranking databases and literature. This helped establish the broad themes of the influence of reputation-based surveys, issues of data manipulation, and money on ranking results.

TYPE OF RANKING

There are numerous ranking systems around the world, each based on its own measure and ranking factors. Below table 1 is a description of some of the world's leading international and regional university ranking systems:

Table 1. Global University Ranking Systems

Ranking Organization	Description	Focus & Metrics
QS World University Rankings (QS)	Published annually since 2004 by Quacquarelli Symonds. Ranks 1,500 universities worldwide.	Academic reputation, employer reputation, faculty/student ratios, citations per faculty, international staff and student numbers. Introduces metrics like sustainability and employment outcomes.
Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE)	Initially collaborated with QS (2004-2009), now independently published. Evaluates 800+ universities.	13 performance indicators: teaching, research, citations, international outlook, industry income. Includes THE 100 Under 50 and THE World Reputation Rankings.
Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)	Compiled by Shanghai Ranking Consultancy since 2003.	Focus on research indicators: publications in Nature/Science, Nobel Prizes, Fields Medalists. Criticized for emphasizing natural sciences and English-language research.
Aggregate Ranking of Top Universities (ARTU)	Meta-ranking produced by UNSW Sydney, evaluates 471 universities (2024).	Aggregates rankings from THE, QS, and ARWU. Considers GDP and R&D expenditures for country-level performance.
Academic Influence	Uses machine learning to rank universities based on faculty and alumni influence.	Data from Wikipedia, Wikidata, Semantic Scholar, etc. Measures faculty and alumni impact across disciplines, countries, and timeframes.

continued on following page

Table 1. Continued

Ranking Organization	Description	Focus & Metrics
Shanghai Ranking (ARWU)	Established in 2003 by Shanghai Ranking Consultancy. Focuses on providing objective, research-driven rankings of global universities, widely recognized for its emphasis on research excellence.	Focus: Research performance, academic reputation, and faculty quality. Metrics: Publications in *Nature* and *Science*, research citations, Nobel Prizes, Fields Medals, highly cited researchers
Center for World University Rankings (CWUR)	Based in UAE, ranks universities based on education quality, faculty prestige, and research impact.	Outcome-based rankings, not reliant on surveys. Focuses on education quality, faculty prestige, and research impact.
QS Asian University Rankings	Established in 2009, ranks 760 universities in Asia.	Region-specific indicators: PhD staff percentage, inbound/outbound exchange students. Dominated by China's institutions.
QS Latin American & Caribbean University Rankings	Launched in 2011, ranks institutions based on academic reputation, employer recognition, and research.	In 2024, 430 institutions ranked, with Brazil leading in representation.
QS Arab Region Universities Rankings	Released in 2014, ranks 223 universities across 18 Arab League countries.	Focus on global recognition, research, teaching resources, and internationalization. King Fahd University of Petroleum & Minerals ranked highest in 2024.

These rankings differ in their focus and methodologies, with some emphasizing research output, employer perceptions, and faculty reputation, while others consider region-specific metrics.

THE IMPACT OF RANKING ON UNIVERSITIY STRATEGIES

University rankings have become the dominant force shaping strategic agendas in higher education institutions globally. Although rankings aim to assess institutional excellence, their influence often leads universities to pursue goals misaligned with their core educational missions (Kayyali et al., 2023). This misalignment is particularly evident in three critical areas: an increased emphasis on research publication over teaching quality, the diversion of resources toward ranking-driven activities rather than student-focused improvements, and faculty hiring and promotion practices that prioritize high-impact publications. These trends reflect how rankings pressure universities to prioritize reputation and global standing, sometimes at the expense of fundamental academic functions (Nguyen et al., 2024).

Increased Focus on Research Publication Over Teaching Quality

A prime example of rankings skewing university priorities can be seen at **University X**, which, in its quest for higher standings in the QS World University Rankings and Times Higher Education (THE) rankings, shifted faculty evaluation criteria heavily towards research metrics such as publication volume and citation impact. This shift led to reduced emphasis on teaching quality, resulting in student dissatisfaction and lower engagement (Rafique et al., 2023). Faculty members face mounting pressure to publish in high-impact journals to secure promotions, tenure, and bonuses, often at the **cost** of dedicating time to course preparation and student advising (Rawat & Meena, 2014).

At universities like UNIRANKS (2025), policies compel faculty to allocate significant time to securing external research funding and international collaborations—activities that raise institutional prestige but reduce incentives for pedagogical innovation and student-centered teaching. Similarly, at University Y, the institutional reward system penalized faculty who invested time in developing new teaching methods, pushing them instead to focus on meeting publication quotas (O'Dwyer et al., 2023).

Allocation of Resources Toward Ranking Metrics Over Student Needs

Ranking-driven strategies also influence how universities allocate resources, often favoring areas that directly impact ranking indicators at the expense of student services. For instance, **University Z** invested heavily in state-of-the-art research laboratories, high-profile faculty recruitment, and international partnerships, while funding for mental health counseling, career advising, and extracurricular programs stagnated (Depo, 2024). This imbalance creates a disconnect between the university's external image and the lived experience of its students.

Furthermore, institutions frequently spend significant funds to attract globally recognized scholars who contribute minimally to teaching or student mentoring but enhance the university's research reputation—such as University A's high-profile recruitment of Nobel laureates with limited classroom engagement (Auranen & Nieminen, 2010). Meanwhile, important student-centered areas such as curriculum development and technological learning support remain underfunded (Tan & Goh, 2014).

Such funding patterns also exacerbate disparities among academic departments. Fields like social sciences and humanities, often producing fewer research grants, receive less support compared to STEM disciplines, limiting students' access to

practical learning, internships, and collaborative opportunities (Hazelkorn & Herlitschka, 2010).

Emphasis on High-Impact Publications in Faculty Hiring and Promotion

University rankings have reshaped faculty hiring and promotion, favoring candidates with extensive publication records over those recognized for teaching excellence or industry experience. At many institutions, such as University B, promotion decisions heavily weigh research productivity, citation metrics, and grant acquisition, while mentoring and curriculum innovation receive less consideration (Li & Yin, 2022; Ocampo et al., 2022).

This emphasis narrows hiring pools and can hinder diversity and inclusivity. Researchers engaged in interdisciplinary, applied, or community-focused research often struggle to compete against candidates with traditional high-impact publications. Similarly, professionals with practical experience but fewer publications are frequently overlooked despite their potential to enrich classroom learning by bridging theory and practice (Awashreh & Al Ghunaimai, 2025a).

Moreover, the "publish or perish" culture pressures early-career academics and Ph.D. students to prioritize quantity and journal prestige, sometimes fostering unethical behaviors such as predatory publishing and compromising research integrity. Intense competition may also discourage collaboration, as individual achievements become paramount (Mutongoza, 2023).

Alternative Models Balancing Research and Student-Centered Priorities

Contrasting these challenges, universities adopting broader evaluation frameworks demonstrate improved educational and community outcomes. For example, University C implemented a multi-dimensional faculty assessment system that values teaching innovation, mentorship, and community engagement alongside research output. This approach led to enhanced student satisfaction and stronger ties with local industries (Baker et al., 2015).

Similarly, University D balanced resource allocation between research infrastructure and student support services, investing in experiential learning, innovative technologies, and comprehensive career counseling. This equilibrium fostered a richer learning environment and better graduate employability outcomes (Abo-Khalil, 2024).

Toward Balanced Strategies and Inclusive Assessment

To address the unintended consequences of rankings, higher education institutions must strive to integrate research excellence with their primary mission of delivering quality education and fostering student development (Edu, 2025). Redefining faculty evaluation to include pedagogical skills, mentorship, and interdisciplinary collaboration alongside scholarly output is essential. Universities should adopt equitable funding models that prioritize both research and student-centered initiatives to promote a holistic academic environment.

Ranking organizations themselves should consider expanding performance criteria to include teaching quality, student satisfaction, employability, and social impact. Such comprehensive ranking frameworks would incentivize institutions to pursue balanced strategies aligned with their broader educational and societal roles (Depo, 2024).

In summary, while rankings have driven innovation in academic research and enhanced international visibility, they have also caused reduced focus on teaching quality, skewed resource allocation, and a publication-centered recruitment culture. Universities must adopt balanced approaches that harmonize research with student-focused practices and broaden their definitions of academic success beyond ranking metrics. By doing so, they can better serve diverse stakeholders and maintain both academic excellence and social relevance (Leong & Zhang, 2024).

RANKING BAIS

While university rankings are widely regarded as benchmarks for institutional excellence, their credibility and fairness have come under increasing scrutiny. Beneath their surface of objectivity, these systems often mask deep commercial interests, cultural biases, and methodological flaws. This section explores the problematic dimensions of university rankings, including their profit-driven motives, Western-centric frameworks, and susceptibility to data manipulation—factors that distort educational priorities and institutional strategies worldwide.

The Commercialization and Biases of Ranking Systems

University ranking systems have become a potent force in influencing the reputation and global standing of higher learning institutions. Rankings affect student and faculty recruitment, research grants, and even policy-making at the government level. But behind their ostensibly neutral facade, university ranking systems are increasingly criticized for commercialization, methodological bias, and data tampering.

This section explains how ranking agencies profit from advisory services, reinforce Western-biased practices that cause harm to the emerging economies' universities, and allow manipulation of placements through self-reported data (Depo, 2024).

The Profit Motive Behind University Rankings

Ranking organizations, including Times Higher Education (THE), QS World University Rankings, and the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), are more akin to business organizations than impartial assessors. Although their rankings are portrayed as objective and unbiased indicators of institutional performance, these organizations accrue huge revenues from consulting activities, data analysis, and customized products for universities seeking to enhance their rankings (Estrada-Real & Cantu-Ortiz, 2022). Besides, most ranking agencies provide advisory services that purport to assist educational institutions in interpreting as well as enhancing their rankings. Such services may involve workshops, strategic planning, and even explicit advice on what organizations can do to enhance their performance according to ranking criteria. This, therefore, creates a conflict of interest as the same institutions that set the ranking criteria are also financially gaining from consulting the universities on how to conform (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020).

For example, QS provides paid advisory services, where they help universities devise strategies for improving their scores. Similarly, THE also provides data insight services, in which universities can compare themselves with others and improve their ranking performance. Thus, such financial deals undermine the integrity of ranking agencies and cast doubt on whether their main concern is educational excellence or profits (QS, 2025). Moreover, certain schemes of rankings provide an option to pay universities to be listed or get detailed feedback on their scores. Such a pay-to-play system can unfairly advantage those universities that can afford to spend money and disenfranchise poorer or smaller universities that have academic merit or research caliber but lack the resources to interact with ranking organizations.

For instance, the University of Indonesia publicly criticized the fairness of international rankings after discovering that universities that had paid for consultancy services from QS saw disproportionately high jumps in their scores, despite minimal structural changes. Eventually, this commercialization distorts rankings towards institutions with financial means to engage, rather than truly exceptional institutions in the realm of research and education (McCowan, 2016).

Western-Centric Methodologies and Their Disadvantages

A further serious critique of ranking schemes is that they rely on methods which systematically favor universities in Western countries, in particular universities in the United States and Europe. This puts institutions in the developing world at a disadvantage since they are not able to compete on equal terms (Fauzi et al., 2020). Additionally, many ranking processes heavily rely on research output and citations in publications listed in databases such as Scopus and Web of Science, which mainly display publications in English. This approach generates a drawback for institutions that are located in non-English-speaking countries, where research could be published locally or regionally, regardless of its high quality and relevant input. Thus, the research output of the higher educational institutions of Asia, Latin America, and Africa receives poor visibility in the global rankings (Aithal & Kumar, 2020).

A case in point is the University of São Paulo, Brazil's highest-ranked university, which consistently scores poorly in international rankings compared to its national reputation—largely because much of its high-impact research is published in Portuguese and appears in regional journals. Moreover, ranking exercises often employ surveys based on reputation to assess the status viewed by universities. These surveys take the opinions of employers and academics with many positions in Western countries and are not acquainted with universities in developing countries. Because of this, renowned universities in the United States, United Kingdom, and Europe always get higher ranks, whereas newer or less renowned universities struggle to get noticed even though they are performing extremely well in education and research (NORC, 2024). Furthermore, Western-biased rankings tend to concentrate on factors such as research grants, student-to-staff ratios, and campus facilities—indices which naturally favor universities in wealthier countries with more generous higher education endowments. Universities in less affluent countries often have fewer financial resources and research grant possibilities and cutting-edge facilities. However, such universities may still provide good quality education and be valuable contributors to the local communities, albeit low on global indices (Herbst, 2007).

The University of Cape Coast in Ghana, for example, has received regional acclaim for its teacher education programs and community outreach, yet remains marginalized in global rankings due to its limited research funding and lack of international visibility.

Data Manipulation and Self-Reporting Issues

Ranking systems' validity is again compromised by the use of self-reported information from institutions. Institutions would use strong manipulation possibilities to manipulate data and artificially enhance their rankings without strong verifica-

tion protocols (Olcay & Bulu, 2016). For example, institutions can overstate their research output, academic qualification of faculty, or employability of students to enhance rankings. In particular, some institutions strategically hire highly cited researchers on a part-time basis to increase their citation impact without significantly contributing to the university's academic environment. Similarly, others may inflate faculty-student ratios by including adjunct or part-time faculty members who do not actively participate in teaching or research (Johnes, 2018).

For instance, in 2022, Columbia University was temporarily removed from the U.S. News ranking after it was found to have submitted inflated data about faculty credentials and class sizes.

Second, universities strategically plan to exploit ranking indicators. Universities focus on those indicators that can be easily manipulated rather than pursuing genuine academic enhancement. For example, a university may focus on publishing research in specific journals which contribute to ranking scores without conducting interdisciplinary or locally relevant research. Others also invite scholars to cite institutionally close researchers as a way of increasing the citation count, a phenomenon referred to as citation stacking (Gadd, 2021).

Also, while their coverage is broad, ranking agencies are not transparent regarding how they collect and evaluate data. Universities submit data without external auditing; thus inconsistencies and biases are not verified. In contrast to banks, which are subject to strict regulatory oversight, ranking agencies are hardly accountable, which raises questions about the credibility and fairness of their ratings (Murikah et al., 2024).

Towards Mission-Based and Context-Sensitive Alternatives

Given these systemic problems, several institutions and regional bodies have started exploring alternative models that prioritize contextual relevance, inclusivity, and societal impact. For example, the U-Multirank system, funded by the European Commission, allows universities to assess themselves based on mission-specific indicators rather than standardized global metrics. Similarly, the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) in India includes metrics like regional outreach, diversity, and teaching quality. These context-sensitive approaches are better suited to capture the multidimensional value of universities, especially in the Global South, and offer a more equitable model of evaluation.

RETHINKING RANKING

University rankings influence the public image of higher education globally. They impact students, inform universities to plan, and inform policy. There has been criticism of commercialization, constructional bias, as well as data manipulation that puts their validity into question (Taylor & Braddock, 2007). Rankings also privilege Western-based standards and use self-reported data, skewing the global view of education. One of the main criticisms is the absence of transparency in ranking methods, which makes it challenging for stakeholders to evaluate their reliability (Hazelkorn, 2019). Furthermore, universities can manipulate self-reported information to enhance rankings, which calls into question the validity of these measures (Schwartz et al., 2020). Methodological biases also prefer research output to teaching quality, student experience, and contributions to society, penalizing non-Western institutions (Fauzi et al., 2020). In addition, there are conflicts of interest when ranking agencies offer consultancy services to the same universities they rank (Akpan et al., 2023).

These rankings do not reflect the distinct strengths of non-Western world universities by neglecting their efforts in addressing regional problems and driving development (Valero & Van Reenen, 2019). Thus, it is advisable that national accrediting bodies institute measures that adequately take into account qualitative aspects, for instance, social influence and regional value (Kumar et al., 2024). Second, education ministries at the national level need to develop ranking systems that are based on the specific circumstances of the respective local environment, hence guaranteeing consistency with national aspirations (Al-Kuwari & Koç, 2022). Regular monitoring would guarantee updating of these frameworks according to developing needs (Lycytinen et al., 2022).

Financial allocations must target a university's research relevance, teaching quality, and social outreach, towards continued growth (Cattaneo et al., 2014). A combination of base and performance funding would assist strongly developed universities that conduct mutually complementary, worthwhile projects (Dougherty et al., 2014). Encouraging regional academic networks would result in shared resources and addressing local issues (Romero-Sánchez et al., 2024), to the advantage of research as well as students (Ankrah & Al-Tabbaa, 2015).

Lastly, the inclusion of social responsibility in accreditation and ranking criteria would give universities a reward for their contributions to sustainability and societal well-being in general, and motivate them to prioritize ethical projects (Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021). Such an approach would allow students to make efficient choices and force universities to contribute to societal development (Agbakwuru et al., 2024).

Reforming University Rankings

To establish a more equitable and credible ranking system, several key reforms are necessary:

- Greater Transparency: Ranking organizations should fully disclose their methodologies, detailing how data is collected, verified, and weighted. Clearer standards would enhance trust and allow for more informed decision-making.
- Independent Auditing: Mandating third-party verification of university data would reduce opportunities for manipulation and ensure that rankings reflect accurate and unbiased information.
- Diversified Metrics: Rankings should incorporate a broader range of factors, including regional impact, social contributions, and innovative teaching methods, rather than primarily focusing on research output and citation counts.
- Reducing Conflicts of Interest: Organizations responsible for ranking universities should separate their ranking operations from consulting services to maintain impartiality and credibility.
- Recognition of Non-Western Institutions: Rankings must better account for linguistic diversity, local research contributions, and the unique challenges faced by universities in developing regions to ensure a fair representation of global higher education.

Until these changes are implemented, university rankings will continue to favor a select few institutions while failing to provide an accurate and comprehensive evaluation of the diverse strengths within the global higher education landscape. Students, educators, and policymakers must critically assess ranking methodologies and advocate for a more transparent and equitable system—one that truly reflects the values and contributions of universities worldwide (Gadd et al., 2021).

ALTERNATIVE MODELS FOE EVALUTING UNIVERSITY PERFORAMNCE

University performance is often measured through international ranking systems that prioritize indicators such as research output, citation frequency, and institutional reputation. However, these metrics often overlook critical dimensions such as the quality of teaching, student satisfaction, and the university's overall societal contribution. As a response to these shortcomings, alternative evaluation models—such as the Balanced Scorecard (BSC), multi-dimensional frameworks like U-Multirank,

and context-sensitive models—offer more inclusive and holistic approaches to assessing institutional performance (Cadez et al., 2015).

The Balanced Scorecard, originally developed by Kaplan and Norton (1992), has been adapted for higher education to align strategic institutional goals with measurable outcomes across four perspectives: teaching and learning, research and innovation, internal processes, and societal engagement (Lassoued, 2018). The teaching and learning dimension considers curriculum effectiveness, student outcomes, and faculty engagement (Coskun & Nizaeva, 2023), while the research and innovation component includes research funding, interdisciplinarity, and the transfer of knowledge to society. The internal process dimension evaluates institutional governance and resource utilization (Awashreh et al., 2024), and the societal engagement dimension focuses on the university's contribution to local development and policy impact (Wendling & Evans, 2023). Practical applications of BSC have been observed in institutions such as the University of Malawi, where the model helped assess service quality and departmental alignment with institutional missions (Chimtengo et al., 2017). Similarly, universities in the Gulf region have applied BSC to support national development goals and performance-based budgeting.

Complementing the BSC approach, U-Multirank represents a multi-dimensional, user-driven framework that evaluates universities across diverse domains, including teaching and learning, research, knowledge transfer, international orientation, and regional engagement (Leong & Zhang, 2024). Unlike traditional global rankings that collapse all performance metrics into a single score, U-Multirank provides disaggregated data that allows institutions to showcase strengths in specific areas. For instance, universities in the Netherlands and Spain have effectively used U-Multirank to emphasize their excellence in regional collaboration and student-centered learning (Daraio et al., 2015). By incorporating indicators such as student surveys, industry partnerships, and societal contributions, U-Multirank empowers universities to pursue missions that go beyond academic prestige, supporting institutional diversity and encouraging transparency. Furthermore, it avoids penalizing institutions that may be strong in community outreach or teaching but less competitive in global research rankings.

Another emerging category of evaluation frameworks is the context-sensitive or mission-based model, which emphasizes institutional diversity, local relevance, and public responsibility. These models account for the specific missions of universities, particularly those serving disadvantaged communities, promoting indigenous knowledge, or focusing on applied research to address local challenges (Dearden et al., 2019). Unlike conventional rankings, which prioritize global metrics like citation counts and faculty prestige, context-sensitive frameworks evaluate institutions based on contributions to regional development, policy engagement, social inclusion, and knowledge democratization (Marginson et al., 2023). Examples include Finland’s

education evaluation systems, which assess institutions based on accessibility, equity, and social cohesion, and Qatar's performance-based assessments that align institutional goals with national development strategies (Al-Kuwari & Koç, 2022). These models recognize excellence in forms that are often marginalized in mainstream rankings, thereby advancing epistemic justice and institutional legitimacy.

Taken together, these alternative frameworks—Balanced Scorecard, U-Multirank, and context-sensitive models—represent a shift toward more equitable, mission-oriented, and comprehensive evaluation strategies. They provide institutions with tools to align performance measurement with their educational philosophies, societal roles, and long-term strategic visions. Rather than reinforcing global hierarchies and research monocultures, these models promote institutional differentiation, encourage policy innovation, and support a more inclusive and responsible global higher education ecosystem (Abo-Khalil, 2024).

Policy Recommendations

In light of the shortcomings of current university ranking systems and the potential of more equitable alternatives, this chapter proposes a set of policy recommendations aimed at realigning evaluation mechanisms with educational quality, societal relevance, and institutional diversity. First, national accreditation bodies should be established or empowered to develop context-specific ranking methodologies that move beyond conventional quantitative metrics. These bodies should incorporate qualitative assessments of societal impact, research applicability, and contributions to local and national development (Kumar et al., 2024). To ensure legitimacy and adaptability, these methodologies should undergo pilot testing across a representative sample of institutions. Results from these pilots can inform iterative refinements based on stakeholder feedback and contextual realities.

Second, education ministries should design evaluation frameworks tailored to national development goals, socio-economic conditions, and cultural values. Unlike global rankings, which apply uniform metrics, national systems should emerge through collaborative consultations with universities, employers, civil society actors, and policymakers. These frameworks should be periodically reviewed and adapted through evidence-based policy cycles and structured stakeholder dialogues (Lycytinen et al., 2022). Third, funding mechanisms should be restructured to reward institutions based on a balanced set of performance indicators, including research quality, teaching effectiveness, community engagement, and sustainability initiatives. A dual model that combines base funding with performance-based components—linked to both qualitative and quantitative measures—can promote excellence while ensuring equity across institutions (Cattaneo et al., 2014; Dougherty et al., 2014). Fourth, governments and higher education consortia should actively

promote regional collaboration. By fostering inter-university research networks, faculty exchanges, and shared infrastructure, institutions can collectively address pressing societal challenges and support regional innovation ecosystems. Targeted incentives such as joint research grants, mobility programs, and tax credits for collaborative initiatives can strengthen these networks (Romero-Sánchez et al., 2024; Ankrah & Al-Tabbaa, 2015).

Finally, ranking systems and accreditation models must integrate metrics that reflect universities' contributions to social responsibility and sustainable development. This includes recognizing outreach programs, inclusive education initiatives, environmental stewardship, and partnerships with underrepresented communities. Embedding these criteria into national evaluation frameworks will encourage institutions to align their missions with public good imperatives (Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021; Agbakwuru et al., 2024). Collectively, these recommendations aim to shift the focus of higher education policy away from reputation-driven metrics and toward more meaningful indicators that reflect the full scope of university contributions in diverse contexts.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this chapter challenge the dominance of global ranking frameworks that rely heavily on quantifiable, prestige-based indicators, and call for a paradigmatic shift in how universities are assessed. The study underscores the urgent need for multidimensional, mission-sensitive evaluation tools that align more closely with the educational, social, and developmental functions of higher education.

Drawing on institutional theory, the chapter illustrates how universities adapt their internal strategies in response to external pressures exerted by rankings, often compromising their core missions in pursuit of prestige (Roszkowska-Menkes, 2023). Signaling theory further explains how rankings influence stakeholder perceptions, shaping student choices, faculty recruitment, and employer preferences based on often incomplete or misleading proxies for quality (Connelly et al., 2024). Stakeholder theory, meanwhile, highlights the tension universities face in balancing the interests of diverse actors—governments, communities, students, and industries—while constrained by narrow, externally imposed evaluation criteria (Bridoux & Stoelhorst, 2022).

This study suggests that long-term institutional success is more likely to result from strategic alignment with national development priorities, societal needs, and knowledge equity, rather than short-term gains in global rankings. By proposing frameworks that integrate qualitative and contextually relevant indicators—such as societal engagement, regional impact, and teaching quality—the chapter promotes a more inclusive and justice-oriented approach to performance assessment. Such

models are particularly vital for universities in non-Western and under-resourced contexts, where conventional rankings often fail to capture local innovation, equity efforts, or cultural knowledge systems.

Ultimately, the theoretical contribution of this work lies in its reframing of institutional excellence: not as a race for visibility in global rankings, but as a multidimensional, locally grounded, and socially embedded process. This approach opens space for universities to redefine their value and legitimacy on their own terms—rooted in public accountability, ethical governance, and the pursuit of broad-based knowledge advancement.

CONCLUSION

This study critically examined the structural limitations and embedded biases of global university ranking systems, highlighting the need for a paradigm shift toward alternative, context-sensitive frameworks that more accurately reflect the complex and multifaceted missions of higher education institutions. It emphasized that current prestige-driven, research-heavy indicators fail to capture essential dimensions such as teaching quality, student success, community engagement, and long-term societal impact. The findings reveal that global ranking systems tend to perpetuate structural inequities by favoring research-centric and Western institutions, thereby reinforcing global hierarchies in knowledge production and access to resources. Furthermore, these rankings often misguide institutional strategies by pushing universities to prioritize performance in a narrow set of metrics, often at the expense of broader educational values such as equity, interdisciplinarity, and inclusion. This misalignment not only distorts internal priorities—such as the marginalization of teaching in favor of citation-driven research—but also misleads key stakeholders, including students, faculty, and policymakers, by projecting a superficial image of quality and excellence that does not necessarily correspond with local or national educational objectives.

In light of these challenges, the study proposes a set of key recommendations aimed at restoring balance and integrity in how universities are evaluated. Universities should proactively develop internal evaluation systems that reward a more holistic performance profile, combining research productivity with teaching excellence, civic responsibility, and innovation ecosystems. Additionally, institutions must forge meaningful partnerships with industry, civil society, and government to ensure their contributions are socially embedded and responsive to real-world challenges. On a global scale, ranking agencies must be urged to adopt multidimensional assessment frameworks that factor in criteria such as student employability, inclusivity, sus-

tainability practices, and learner satisfaction, thus offering a more comprehensive picture of institutional impact.

These recommendations carry important policy implications. National education authorities should design independent, regionally attuned ranking systems that are closely aligned with local development agendas and educational values, particularly in the Global South. Moreover, funding and accreditation mechanisms must be restructured to reward institutions for their commitment to public value—measured through community service, pedagogical innovation, and long-term societal outcomes—rather than through narrow research outputs alone. In this regard, it is equally vital to encourage collaborative governance models in which universities actively engage with ranking organizations to co-create fairer and more inclusive assessment methodologies that reflect the full spectrum of academic endeavor.

Ultimately, this study underscores the pressing need to reimagine how higher education institutions are evaluated and valued in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. University rankings should function not as tools for reputational competition, but as mechanisms for developmental progress, equity, and continuous improvement. Moving forward, future research should focus on empirically testing alternative evaluation models, conducting longitudinal studies to assess the systemic impact of rankings on governance and policy, and amplifying the voices of underrepresented stakeholders—including faculty, students, and communities—who are most affected by these systems. By embracing pluralistic, equitable, and justice-oriented frameworks, the global higher education sector can chart a path toward more inclusive excellence that truly serves both local and global public good.

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Chapter 2
The Debate Over the Objectivity of University Rankings

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ABSTRACT

This chapter interrogates the long-standing claim of objectivity within global university ranking systems, revealing the ideological and methodological biases embedded in their design. While rankings present themselves as neutral evaluators of academic excellence, they often privilege Western-centric values, reinforce institutional hierarchies, and ignore local context. By examining the construction and use of ranking indicators, the chapter critiques the assumption that quality in higher education can be universally quantified. It also explores how these rankings shape institutional behavior, funding priorities, and academic cultures, often to the detriment of diversity and equity. Special attention is given to the marginalization of institutions in the Global South, whose realities are frequently misrepresented or excluded. The chapter concludes by calling for more reflexive, transparent, and inclusive frameworks that move beyond superficial metrics and engage with the complex, pluralistic nature of academic excellence.

INTRODUCTION

In an era increasingly defined by quantification and competition, university rankings have emerged as powerful instruments shaping the global landscape of higher education. Promoted as tools of transparency and accountability, these

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rankings promise to offer objective comparisons between institutions, ostensibly empowering students, policymakers, and stakeholders with reliable data to make informed decisions. Yet beneath the surface of this apparent clarity lies a complex and contentious debate about the very foundations of such metrics—about whether university rankings can ever be truly objective, and what is sacrificed in the pursuit of a standardized global hierarchy of academic excellence.

The allure of rankings is not difficult to understand (Altbach, 2006). In a world awash with information, a simple ordinal list offers the comfort of structure—a perceived clarity amid the chaos. Whether it is the Times Higher Education (THE) rankings, the QS World University Rankings, or the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), these league tables reduce the rich, multifaceted work of universities into digestible numbers, offering a seductive illusion of comparability. Institutions celebrate upward movement in these rankings as a mark of prestige; governments often tie funding and policy incentives to these metrics; and students, particularly those from transnational contexts, use them as a compass for academic mobility. In effect, rankings have become not only reflections of the academic world but active agents reshaping it.

However, this normalization of rankings as the gold standard for assessing higher education performance conceals deeper tensions. Can one truly measure the quality of a university with a single number? Is the value of teaching, research, societal impact, and cultural contribution reducible to a weighted formula? Who decides which indicators count—and which are left out? These are not merely technical questions but profoundly philosophical ones, touching on the epistemology of knowledge itself. The assumption of objectivity, which gives rankings their authority, is increasingly challenged by scholars who argue that these systems are infused with cultural, ideological, and methodological biases. They argue that university rankings, far from being neutral, reflect a particular worldview—one that privileges market-driven values, favors English-speaking research-intensive institutions, and marginalizes non-Western epistemologies.

Moreover, the mechanics of rankings often reward conformity rather than innovation (He et al, 2025). Institutions are pressured to tailor their strategies around ranking criteria, even when these diverge from their local mission or public mandate. Academic programs are restructured, faculty hiring is influenced, and research priorities are redirected—all in the name of climbing higher in the global pecking order. This phenomenon, sometimes referred to as "ranking-induced isomorphism," suggests that the chase for rank often undermines the diversity and creativity that rankings claim to reveal.

The implications are particularly stark for universities in the Global South, where limited resources, linguistic diversity, and alternative academic traditions often do not align with the assumptions built into dominant ranking methodologies (Lloyd &

Ordorika, 2021). As a result, these institutions are not only ranked lower but often rendered invisible. The epistemic injustice that results from this marginalization raises critical concerns about whose knowledge counts in the global education marketplace—and who gets left behind.

This chapter takes up these concerns by critically examining the objectivity claims of university rankings. It seeks to unravel the assumptions embedded within ranking systems and interrogates the power dynamics they reinforce. By highlighting methodological limitations, cultural exclusions, and the strategic behavior rankings incentivize, the chapter aims to offer a deeper understanding of the political economy of academic measurement. Ultimately, the chapter does not call for the abolition of rankings altogether but advocates for a more reflexive and pluralistic approach—one that recognizes the limitations of measurement, respects institutional diversity, and foregrounds the ethical stakes of knowledge evaluation in a globalized world.

The Pursuit of Objectivity in Higher Education Metrics

For as long as institutions have existed, the need to evaluate them—scrutinize their value, assess their performance, rank their contributions—has lingered like a persistent itch. In the realm of higher education, this impulse has evolved into an intricate and often bewildering architecture of metrics, algorithms, league tables, and glossy reports. And somewhere within this elaborate scaffolding sits a tantalizing promise: objectivity. The idea that, amid all the subjective messiness of human learning, teaching, and research, there could exist a clean, unassailable method of measuring what is "better," "stronger," "more excellent." That promise has seduced policymakers, academics, students, and donors alike, offering a way to tame the untamable—to boil down the profound complexity of a university's mission into neat comparative indicators.

But what are we really doing when we chase this objectivity? What are we measuring, and what do we miss in the process? The notion of objectivity in educational evaluation often disguises itself in the language of neutrality. Numbers are neutral, aren't they? A publication count is just a number; so is a student-to-faculty ratio (Nau & Shields, 2025). But neutrality is not the same as fairness, and numbers don't speak—they are made to speak by the frameworks we impose on them. The metrics we choose, the weightings we assign, the data we exclude: none of these are neutral acts. They are decisions, shaped by ideologies, shaped by who gets to ask the questions, and by what narratives we believe about what a university should be.

Take research output, for example. It seems harmless enough: count the papers, tally the citations, score the impact factor. But pause for a second. What kind of research gets published in the journals that count toward those numbers? Who edits those journals? Which languages dominate? Which disciplines receive the lion's

share of attention, and which are brushed aside? It quickly becomes clear that what's being measured is not simply "output," but a very specific type of academic performance that aligns closely with the expectations of Anglophone, science-driven, publication-focused systems—predominantly Western in their cultural assumptions and epistemological orientations (Kayyali, 2020). And yet, when rankings report these figures, they do so with a veneer of impartiality, a kind of mechanical precision that strips away the mess of context. A university in a conflict-affected region with a vital community mission but little access to high-impact publishing platforms? Penalized. A teaching-focused institution producing transformative outcomes for first-generation students? Devalued. The assumption that these institutions are "less excellent" is baked into the very formula used to assess them.

Still, the seduction of the metric persists. There's something comfortingly rational about numbers, something that whispers a promise of truth—especially in a world increasingly allergic to ambiguity. But objectivity, at least as practiced in ranking systems, isn't some untainted virtue that arrives from the heavens; it's built, curated, and often distorted by the hands that craft it. And hands, no matter how well-intentioned, come with histories, biases, and blind spots. What's particularly troubling is how easily objectivity slides into orthodoxy. Once a set of metrics is established, institutions begin to shape themselves around those metrics—not because they necessarily believe in their validity, but because survival and reputation often depend on it (Kulczycki, 2023). This is the silent coercion of the ranking regime: universities alter course structures, tweak faculty policies, and redirect funds—not to fulfill their educational mission, but to check boxes and climb ladders. Over time, the metric ceases to be a measure and becomes a mandate.

It is here, in this distortion of intent, that the promise of objectivity starts to feel hollow. Education is not an assembly line. It's not just about producing research or attracting international students or building glitzy campuses. It's about developing minds, creating space for critical inquiry, pushing boundaries, serving society, confronting injustice. These are messy, unruly, deeply human endeavors—and they resist reduction.

Yet our systems don't reward that messiness. Instead, they reward scale, speed, and standardization. The very things that rankings can count. And so, institutions that innovate quietly, serve communities invisibly, or engage in research that doesn't yield citations but changes lives—they disappear from the frame. It's a paradox, really. The pursuit of objectivity, which should have broadened our understanding of institutional quality, ends up narrowing it. We begin to mistake what is visible for what is valuable, and what is countable for what is meaningful.

There's also a dangerous feedback loop at play. Once rankings become widely accepted, they begin to shape reality. Students choose universities based on rankings. Donors fund institutions based on their position (Estrada-Real & Cantu-Ortiz,

2022). Policymakers distribute resources according to the same logic. And so the ranked get richer, and the poor stay peripheral—not because they are objectively worse, but because the metric says so. What we end up with is not a level playing field, but a self-reinforcing hierarchy dressed up as objectivity.

The irony is that many of the most profound intellectual traditions in the academy—from philosophy to anthropology to sociology—have taught us to be suspicious of simple answers. These traditions teach us that context matters, that power shapes knowledge, that systems reflect the values of those who build them (Kayyali, 2023 D). And yet, in our hunger for accountability and recognition, we've allowed a system to take root that often forgets these lessons. We've let objectivity become a kind of fetish—something to be worshipped, even when it's clear it no longer serves us.

None of this is to say that measurement has no place in higher education. Accountability matters. Transparency matters. But the question is: what kind of accountability? For whom? And toward what end? Perhaps the real failure of the current system lies not in its metrics per se, but in its imagination. The imagination to conceive of excellence as something multifaceted, plural, and context-bound. The imagination to develop evaluative systems that are dialogic rather than extractive—systems that listen, rather than dictate. Systems that allow a university in rural Kenya, or war-torn Syria, or the Amazon basin to define excellence on its own terms, rather than always in reference to Harvard or Oxford.

There's a word that rarely appears in ranking frameworks but might be the key to rethinking them: humility. A system that claims to measure something as vast and complex as higher education should begin with the humility to admit what it cannot know (Godfrey, 2023). It should acknowledge the partiality of its vision. It should be open to revision, to critique, to difference. And yet, humility is rarely profitable. Rankings thrive on authority, on bold claims, on the appearance of finality. "These are the top 100 universities in the world"—not "in our view, based on these indicators, recognizing these limitations." The former headlines sell; the latter gets buried in methodology PDFs no one reads. So, where does that leave us?

Perhaps in a moment of reckoning. A slow, uneven awakening to the idea that our obsession with measurement might be crowding out other ways of knowing, other ways of valuing. That the pursuit of objectivity, if left unexamined, might lead us not to truth but to conformity, to exclusion, to a brittle, fragile vision of what higher education can be. And perhaps—just perhaps—the future lies not in abandoning evaluation altogether, but in reclaiming it. In rebuilding it around principles of justice, plurality, and care. In remembering that universities are not machines to be optimized, but living, breathing communities of learners, teachers, thinkers, and dreamers. And that objectivity, if it is to mean anything at all, must be anchored not in detachment, but in responsibility.

Ranking Agencies and the Construction of Academic Legitimacy

Academic legitimacy—what a curious, slippery thing. It wears the face of prestige, cloaks itself in tradition, and marches to the beat of metrics (Główczewski & Burdziej, 2023). Yet the question lingers, quietly yet persistently: who decides what counts as legitimate in the grand, sprawling universe of global higher education? Whose voice gets to echo loudest across boardrooms, ministries, and classrooms? Increasingly, the answer comes not from the scholars themselves, not from the communities universities serve, but from a curious class of actors—ranking agencies.

At first glance, these agencies resemble any other data-driven service: efficient, detached, offering the world neatly sorted lists wrapped in confidence. They tell us who the top 100 are. They map a landscape, or so it seems. But look closer—pull back the curtain just slightly—and the illusion begins to unravel. These entities do more than observe. They craft narratives, dictate value, bestow status. They are less cartographers than architects, designing the very terrain they claim merely to describe.

What makes a ranking agency so powerful is not simply its data or the reach of its platform. It's the authority it is perceived to hold—the symbolic capital it accumulates. Once THE or QS or ARWU speaks, the echo resounds across continents (Rubio-Alcalá & Coyle, 22021). Presidents of universities react, rectors recalibrate budgets, strategic plans are rewritten, press releases go out. In a strange reversal of roles, it is not universities who validate these agencies—it is the agencies who confer legitimacy on universities. That inversion should trouble anyone who still believes in the university as an autonomous space of critical inquiry. But how did we get here? How did these agencies, most of them non-academic in origin, come to wield such disproportionate influence over academic ecosystems that took centuries to build?

The story, perhaps unsurprisingly, begins in the marketplace. In the early 2000s, as globalization accelerated and the international student market ballooned, universities found themselves in competition for attention—visibility, not merely excellence, became the currency of academic prestige (Levine & Van Pelt, 2021). Into that gap stepped the ranking agencies, with their promise of clarity amid the noise. A league table, after all, is instantly readable. A brand with a number is easier to sell. And in a world where higher education increasingly overlaps with tourism, finance, and policy, simplicity sells.

The agencies saw an opportunity. And they seized it, not hesitantly but with corporate precision. They constructed indicators that rewarded certain behaviors: publishing in indexed journals, attracting international students, growing endowments. They built databases, designed glossy websites, created metrics with a mystique. And before long, their indicators didn't just reflect success—they *defined* it. But there's something unsettling in the way these agencies quietly rewrote the

criteria for academic worth. Their frameworks, however elaborate, are rooted in decisions—decisions about what to count, how much to weigh it, which sources to trust. These decisions are rarely democratic, often opaque, and almost never sensitive to the peculiarities of regional context or disciplinary diversity. They operate with a monolithic logic: research equals excellence, citations equal impact, English equals universality.

This flattening of academic richness into digestible metrics produces not just skewed results, but distorted incentives. Suddenly, what was once peripheral becomes central, and what was central fades into the background. Humanities departments, with their nuanced, long-form, often locally grounded scholarship, struggle to score well. Indigenous knowledge systems, oral traditions, non-Western epistemologies—they're nowhere to be found. And yet a school that hires a handful of high-citation scientists can leap up the tables, even if its teaching quality remains questionable, even if it serves no local need.

Ranking agencies rarely ask: What is this university *for*? Who does it serve? What kind of knowledge does it seek to cultivate? Instead, they ask: How visible is it in *our* metrics? And the irony? Many of these agencies are, at their core, media companies. Their revenue doesn't come from peer-reviewed journals or academic committees—it comes from advertising, consultancy, analytics. Their business model thrives on universities caring deeply about their position. They offer "support packages," optimization strategies, exclusive data dashboards. In other sectors, this would be considered a conflict of interest. In higher education, it's normalized.

There's also a strange performative aspect to all this. Universities perform for the rankings, and the agencies, in turn, perform a kind of objectivity. It's a dance—one that repeats annually, like a ritual (Decuypere & Landri, 2021). The release of the new rankings brings with it a flurry of reactions: triumph, embarrassment, denial, resolve. Institutions that rise celebrate with banners; those that fall issue statements; those not listed at all are left to explain their absence to puzzled stakeholders. It becomes less about the work being done and more about where one stands in a fabricated pecking order. And yet the absurdity often escapes scrutiny. Imagine a global ranking of hospitals that excludes patient feedback. Or a list of the best cities that disregards the views of the people who live there. That's what many university rankings resemble. They are exercises in top-down valuation, detached from the lived experience of education.

Academic legitimacy, then, becomes something awarded from above, not something built from within (Fleming, 2021). It is no longer about scholarly contribution, pedagogical innovation, or social engagement—it is about visibility, alignment with a narrow set of criteria, and compliance with an unspoken but powerful order. And the consequences ripple outward. Ministries of education base funding on rankings. Immigration policies privilege graduates from "top" universities. Employers skim

resumes by institutional brand. The cascading effects are vast, reinforcing inequality, solidifying hierarchies, and concentrating influence in already privileged institutions.

For universities in the Global South, this logic can be especially punishing (Lee & Naidoo, 2021). They are asked to compete on terms that ignore their realities—terms that reward publishing in English, in journals that cost thousands to access, judged by citations from scholars in the Global North. Their languages, research agendas, and local commitments are often invisible to the ranking apparatus. The system tells them, subtly but unmistakably: adapt or be left behind. And adapt they do, sometimes at great cost. Resources are funneled into English-language publication pipelines, even when those resources are desperately needed elsewhere. Mission statements are revised, not to reflect local needs, but to mimic the language of "global competitiveness." The university's soul, in many cases, is traded for a better spot on a spreadsheet. What gets lost in all this is the understanding that legitimacy is not a universal currency. It is relational, contextual, evolving. A university serving first-generation rural students, revitalizing endangered languages, or training local health workers may not sparkle in the global metrics—but its legitimacy is profound, grounded in its relationship with its community (Lee, 2022). That kind of legitimacy cannot be captured by an algorithm.

So, what is to be done? Dismantling the current ranking regime may be unrealistic, at least in the short term (Brantley et al, 2024). But unmasking its mechanisms, questioning its claims, and challenging its authority—that is a vital first step. Universities, especially those outside the traditional power centers, must begin to articulate their own definitions of success. They must resist the pressure to conform, even if only partially, and make room for values that escape quantification. And ranking agencies? If they are to play any constructive role, they must confront the limits of their methods. They must open up their frameworks, diversify their indicators, and consult more widely. They must stop pretending they are passive observers and admit their role as participants in shaping the very system they measure. Because at the end of the day, legitimacy in academia should not be something bestowed by a commercial entity. It should emerge from dialogue, from trust, from impact—measured not just in citations or campus infrastructure, but in minds changed, lives improved, communities uplifted. It should reflect the messy, beautiful, deeply human work of education—not just the clean lines of a bar chart.

If we forget that, we risk becoming mere players in someone else's game. And universities were never meant to be that. They were meant to be spaces of thought, of challenge, of public good. Ranking agencies may continue to build their pyramids of prestige—but it's up to us to remember that true academic legitimacy isn't built in their image (Kayyali, 2023 A). It's lived, it's earned, and often, it's found far from the spotlight.

Bias, Power, and the Illusion of Neutral Methodologies

There's something oddly comforting about the word *methodology*. It sounds precise, scientific, clean. It gives the impression that we've taken all the messy, chaotic, subjective elements of reality and funneled them into a disciplined framework—measured, weighed, codified. In the context of university rankings, this language becomes a kind of armor: institutions trust it, journalists cite it, and governments often build policy around it, rarely stopping to interrogate what lies beneath (Jones, 2022). After all, a number feels apolitical. A formula feels fair. A ranking feels like truth frozen in time. But as history repeatedly reminds us, neutrality is rarely neutral, and methodologies are not above suspicion—they are forged in particular contexts, by particular actors, with particular visions of the world.

The architecture of university rankings is built on decisions—dozens of them (Leal Filho et al, 2024). Which indicators matter? How are they sourced? How are they weighted? What's included, what's left out, and who benefits from these choices? Each of these decisions carries assumptions, and behind those assumptions lurk power, bias, and cultural hegemony. Methodologies do not emerge from voids; they are authored, curated, and ultimately wielded.

It would be naïve to believe that those wielding them are disinterested parties. Power flows through the entire ranking enterprise like an undercurrent—often silent, often unseen, but always present. It manifests not just in which universities rise to the top, but in the very framework that determines what "the top" even means.

Consider, for instance, the overrepresentation of research-centric metrics in most global ranking systems. It's not incidental; it's ideological. The privileging of publication output, citation impact, and research funding tells a story—a particular story—about what constitutes academic value (Kulczycki, 2023). This is a story rooted in a Western, largely Anglo-American tradition of higher education where research dominance often overshadows teaching, community engagement, or local development. It presumes that knowledge is best validated through peer-reviewed journal systems, mostly in English, and mostly focused on the STEM fields. It sidelines alternative knowledge systems, undervalues oral traditions, and ignores research conducted in local languages or serving localized social agendas. That isn't objectivity. That's epistemic gatekeeping dressed up in statistical clothing. And the issue isn't simply about inclusion or exclusion. It's about structure. When a ranking system chooses to assign 40% of its score to citation metrics, it isn't just making a methodological choice—it's embedding a worldview (Thelwall, 2024). One where knowledge flows in one direction, where value is tied to visibility in particular databases, where influence is reduced to the ability to be cited by those already in power. And because citations tend to reproduce the same networks—elite scholars citing elite institutions, prestigious journals citing other prestigious journals—the

system rewards the already powerful and entrenches their dominance. Prestige breeds more prestige, and soon the ladder disappears for those trying to climb.

The illusion of neutrality, then, is not just an oversight—it's a strategy. It allows those with institutional heft, media visibility, and historical clout to appear deserving, while marginalizing the rest as "less competitive," "underperforming," or "developing." And all the while, the numbers whisper: *this is just how it is*. What gets obscured is the deeply situated nature of knowledge production. A university in Bogotá or Nairobi or Kuala Lumpur might be generating profound, socially transformative work that never appears in the pages of *Nature* or *The Lancet*. Not because it isn't excellent, but because it doesn't fit the template. Because it doesn't speak the language of the metrics—literally and metaphorically.

Take teaching quality. How do you measure it in a meaningful, global sense? Some rankings try—student satisfaction surveys, faculty-to-student ratios, reputational votes—but the results are tenuous at best, and at worst, riddled with circular logic. Reputational scores, in particular, are a masterclass in manufactured legitimacy. When academic peers are surveyed on "the best institutions in their field," who comes to mind? The same ones that dominate media coverage, get cited in global reports, and appear year after year in the upper tiers of rankings. It's a self-reinforcing echo chamber. One that rewards the remembered, not necessarily the deserving. And then there's the issue of data transparency. Methodologies are often presented as objective blueprints, but good luck trying to replicate them. The algorithms, the source data, the cleaning processes—much of it remains opaque. The result? A black box of authority. We're asked to trust the outputs because the inputs have been curated by "experts." But expertise, too, is a social construct—one that often privileges technical fluency over critical reflexivity.

The opacity extends to how weightings are decided. Why should internationalization account for 10%? Why not 5%? Why should faculty-student ratio matter more than community engagement? These aren't natural facts; they're decisions rooted in value systems—ones that often go unquestioned because they're embedded in glossy visualizations and statistical dashboards. Bias isn't always a flaw in the system. Sometimes, it is the system. And this system has consequences. Universities don't just observe rankings—they react to them. They reorient priorities, redirect funding, hire strategically, close departments, and launch initiatives—not always because it serves their mission, but because it aligns with what will boost their metrics (Moustafa, 2024). The result is an academy that becomes performative, increasingly choreographed around appearances rather than authenticity. The game is not about being good, but about looking good in the eyes of the ranking agencies.

That's how power works—not through explicit coercion, but through subtle recalibration of what matters. Rankings don't need to threaten or punish; they merely signal, and the rest follows (Schneider & Hutt, 2023). One might argue that

the solution is better methodologies. More nuanced indicators, more representative data sets, more inclusive frameworks. And yes, methodological improvement is important. But it is not enough. Because the issue isn't just technical—it's epistemological. It's about the very foundations upon which we build judgment. Who gets to name excellence? Who gets to define success? Who gets to say that being cited by a global database is more valuable than preserving a language, mentoring a struggling student, or transforming a local community?

Even within the so-called improvements, bias finds a way to persist. A push for gender equity metrics, for instance, might tally the number of women in faculty positions without ever interrogating the structural conditions that make academic careers inhospitable to them. A push for diversity might count the number of international students without asking whether they are integrated, supported, or treated as more than tuition revenue. Metrics can count bodies, but they rarely capture the full story. And so, the illusion continues: the belief that if we just collect enough data, apply the right formulas, and polish the presentation, we can produce fairness. But fairness isn't a statistical output. It's a commitment. One that demands humility, context sensitivity, and a willingness to listen to voices outside the traditional centers of knowledge production.

That's the irony at the heart of all this. Universities—the very places where complexity, nuance, and critique are supposed to flourish—are being measured by systems that often flatten, simplify, and commodify (Featherstone, 2025). And many go along with it, not because they believe in it, but because they feel they have no choice. But we do have a choice. Institutions can begin by asking themselves what they value—truly, deeply. They can make peace with being unranked, or low-ranked, if it means staying true to their mission. They can build alliances around shared values rather than shared metrics. They can resist the tyranny of comparability and embrace the messy plurality of academic life. And scholars, too, can push back—by refusing to equate prestige with impact, by citing more diversely, by valuing the slow, the local, the grounded. By remembering that methodologies, like all human creations, are tools—not truths. Because once we strip away the illusion of neutrality, once we see rankings for what they are—constructed, biased, powerful—we can begin the harder work of building something better. Not perfect, not universal, but honest. And maybe, just maybe, a little more human.

The Global South and the Marginalization of Context

There's a silence in the rankings—not just what is said, but what isn't. A vast quiet where context should be. Universities in the Global South are measured, sliced into data points, and stacked alongside their Northern counterparts on a scale that was never designed with them in mind (Arora, 2024). They're told, often implicitly,

that excellence looks a certain way: citations in Western journals, funding from prestigious bodies, affiliations with Ivy-covered institutions, research in English, global over local. But when these institutions fall short—not of their own missions, but of foreign expectations—they're labeled as lagging, underperforming, or worse, irrelevant. That's not just bad measurement. That's erasure.

It begins with the metrics. Not the numbers themselves, but the logic behind them. Most global ranking systems operate from a universalist assumption: that there is a single scale against which all universities, no matter their geography, resources, or mission, can be fairly judged (Shahjahan & Baizhanov, 2023). It's a seductive fantasy, especially in a world that prizes comparison. But it's one that overlooks the historical, political, and socio-economic asymmetries that shape how universities function across regions. It assumes that a university in Accra should mirror one in Boston, or that Santiago and Sydney are playing the same game. They're not.

The Global South—if we can even use that term without flattening its immense diversity—includes nations shaped by colonial legacies, economic upheavals, linguistic multiplicities, and the persistent push-and-pull between modernity and tradition. Many of its universities were founded as tools of empire, later reimagined in the aftermath of independence as engines of national development, social mobility, or cultural preservation (Enslin & Hedge, 2024). Their goals have often been bound tightly to nation-building, rather than reputation-chasing. They carry mandates not just to publish but to heal fractured societies, to educate first-generation learners, to preserve indigenous knowledge, to train local teachers and nurses and engineers. And yet, none of this fits neatly into the categories that rankings care about.

So, what happens? These institutions get penalized—for not playing a game they never agreed to join. Their publications, if not in indexed Western journals, are dismissed. Their teaching-focused missions are seen as secondary. Their use of local languages is marked as provincial. Their contextual knowledge—painstakingly built over decades—is treated as noise rather than signal. This isn't just academic exclusion. It's epistemic violence.

When a ranking system excludes or devalues forms of knowledge production that emerge from the Global South, it does more than marginalize institutions (Gonzales & Núñez, 2021). It delegitimizes entire intellectual traditions. It tells a young professor in Dakar that their work on Wolof oral traditions matters less than someone publishing in a British journal on Renaissance literature. It tells a researcher in Lahore focused on community health interventions that their labor is invisible unless it appears in the *right* publication. It shapes academic aspirations, reshuffles institutional priorities, and slowly pushes scholars to abandon the vernacular, the local, the urgent—for the global, the prestigious, the quantifiable. And the pressure isn't abstract. Ministries of education in many developing nations increasingly tie funding, incentives, and reforms to international rankings. Accreditation bodies mimic global

metrics (Kayyali, 2023 C). Students, especially those from elite backgrounds, flock to institutions perceived as globally competitive, often equating ranking position with quality. The result is a kind of academic neo-colonialism—where legitimacy is conferred externally, where the benchmarks of success are imported rather than cultivated, and where institutions are judged not by how well they serve their societies, but by how well they conform to a foreign standard.

Even the language of "aspiring to global standards" carries a loaded implication. Global, in this context, rarely means inclusive. It means Northern. It means Anglophone. It means neoliberal. It rarely means plural. The notion of a shared, borderless standard of excellence sounds noble, but in practice, it often functions as a gatekeeping mechanism—a velvet rope across the academy's VIP section, allowing entry only to those who mirror its preferred image.

Of course, some institutions in the Global South have broken through. They've climbed the ranks, published in high-impact journals, built glittering campuses, attracted international faculty. But at what cost? Often, it involves a process of internal transformation—where local relevance is traded for global visibility, where policies are reshaped not for educational impact but for metric optimization. Faculty are pressured to publish in English even if it distances them from the communities they serve (Pardo-Guerra, 2022). Curricula are redesigned to mimic elite Western models. Indigenous perspectives are relegated to electives. These aren't acts of growth; they're acts of erasure. And yet, the narrative persists—that these universities must "catch up," "modernize," "internationalize." Rarely does the conversation run in the other direction. Rarely is there space to ask: what might the Global North learn from the pedagogical practices of the Global South? What innovations, born of necessity or cultural ingenuity, might expand the global imagination of what a university can be? What forms of resilience, forged in scarcity, might offer lessons in sustainability, community, or care?

The marginalization of context isn't just an oversight—it's a refusal to listen. It's not just the metrics or the language. It's the epistemology itself—the deep-seated belief that knowledge flows in one direction, from the North to the South, from the "developed" to the "developing," from the center to the periphery. Rankings crystallize this belief. They build hierarchies of knowledge production that place Harvard at the summit and Hanoi at the margins, not because of inherent quality, but because of a system that mistakes familiarity with excellence.

Even attempts to "adjust" rankings for regional specificity often fall short (Pinto-Delacadena et al, 2024). They tinker with formulas, add a few new indicators, maybe include a broader set of institutions. But they rarely rethink the underlying logic. They rarely ask what excellence looks like in Maputo or Medellín or Manila—not in comparison to Cambridge, but on its own terms. They don't build frameworks from the ground up; they retrofit old ones and call them inclusive.

There's an uncomfortable parallel here with colonial mapping. Just as colonial cartographers redrew territories to fit foreign imaginations—ignoring rivers, communities, histories—so too do global rankings redraw the academic map, carving out spaces of legitimacy with little regard for the contours of context. The problem is not ambition. Every university deserves the chance to thrive, to grow, to reach beyond borders. But ambition divorced from context becomes mimicry. And mimicry, especially when it masquerades as progress, is a kind of quiet death. A death of mission. A death of identity.

What's needed is a radical reimagining—not just of rankings, but of value. A willingness to recognize that excellence doesn't always shine under fluorescent lights or come wrapped in citations. That sometimes, it speaks in unfamiliar tongues. That sometimes, it grows in the cracks of neglect and blooms despite the odds. What might a context-sensitive evaluation system look like? Not one imposed from above, but co-created. One that asks institutions not to fit into a mold, but to articulate their mission, their challenges, their ecosystem. One that measures impact not just by outputs, but by relevance. How many first-generation students graduated? What languages are being preserved? How has the university changed its community? Has it listened? Has it adapted? Has it stood up when it mattered Such a system would resist easy comparison. It would be messy. Subjective. Uncomfortable. But it would also be honest. And perhaps honesty is what's been missing most.

In the rush for recognition, we've built systems that favor clarity over truth, simplicity over depth. We've convinced ourselves that rankings are mirrors. But they're not. They're portraits—painted with selective brushes, framed in ideology, lit to flatter a certain kind of institution. It's time to stop mistaking the map for the territory. Because the Global South is not a blank space waiting to be ranked. It's a tapestry of intellect, struggle, vision, and hope. It deserves to be seen—not as an anomaly, not as an aspirant, but as a contributor, a challenger, a maker of knowledge in its own right. To marginalize its context is to rob the global academy of its full richness. And to center it—to really listen, to really learn—is not charity. It's justice.

Toward a More Reflexive and Inclusive Ranking Paradigm

It's tempting, in the face of all the distortion, all the institutional posturing and systemic blind spots, to call for the demolition of university rankings altogether—to tear down the scaffolding and declare the project bankrupt. But that instinct, while understandable, may be too neat. Too easy. Because the problem isn't necessarily the act of evaluation itself. Humans evaluate. We compare, we organize, we seek clarity in complexity. We want to know how things stand, how they differ, how they

grow. That impulse is neither shallow nor avoidable. What's broken is the lens—not the desire to see, but the way we've chosen to look.

If rankings are to survive—and there's little doubt they will, given their grip on institutional behavior and public perception—then the conversation must shift. Away from reforming metrics to refining meaning. Away from technical tweaks toward epistemic humility. What's needed is not a better algorithm, but a more reflexive imagination—an inclusive framework that understands higher education not as a race to the top, but as a dense forest of different trees, each growing according to its own season, soil, and purpose. Reflexivity here means more than self-awareness. It requires an unsettling of comfort. A willingness to question the underlying assumptions, not just the methodology. What counts as "quality"? Who gets to say? Are we measuring excellence, or merely proximity to a certain idealized model? It's about staring into the foundations and asking: Why this shape? Why this standard? What's missing?

The first move, perhaps, is to acknowledge the plural. There is no single global university (Kayyali, 2023 B). No ur-institution whose structure, function, or metrics can serve as a proxy for all others. Universities are shaped by context: histories of colonialism or liberation, economic constraints or state generosity, linguistic ecologies, spiritual traditions, political demands, regional priorities. To flatten this vast variation into a global table of top 100s and tiered bands is not simplification—it's disfiguration. A reflexive ranking system would begin by decentering itself (Vosselman et al, 2024). Rather than assuming authority, it would offer perspective—one among many, provisional, shaped by context. It wouldn't pretend to be a mirror of reality. It would be more like a lens, slightly fogged, always in need of adjustment, always admitting the possibility that something valuable might fall outside its view.

Such a system would refuse to universalize indicators with no universal meaning. Take "internationalization," for instance—a cherished metric in most global rankings. It usually refers to the number of international students and faculty, or perhaps the volume of co-authored publications with foreign partners. But what does that tell us about cross-cultural learning? About local-global exchange? About the lived experiences of those students and scholars? Numbers alone can't capture whether internationalization enriches or alienates, whether it builds bridges or reproduces hierarchies. A reflexive system would dig deeper—or admit that it can't.

The same holds for research output. A citation is not a moral judgment. An article's impact can't always be seen in its indexation. A locally grounded study on sanitation in a Kenyan village might save lives—and never crack the surface of Scopus. Is it less worthy than a highly cited theoretical paper read only by a handful of peers? A reflexive ranking system wouldn't default to either extreme. It would allow for difference. It would say: both matter, but in different ways, to different audiences, under different conditions.

Inclusivity, too, demands more than broader participation. It's not enough to add more institutions from the Global South into existing metrics. That's like inviting someone into a room where the furniture is already bolted down. True inclusion means redesigning the room. It means inviting institutions to define their own indicators—what success looks like to them, how it should be measured, which trade-offs they're willing to make. It means trusting that excellence has many dialects.

There is a precedent for this, albeit a quiet one. Some regional initiatives have begun experimenting with context-sensitive evaluations. The African Quality Rating Mechanism, for instance, allows universities to self-assess across areas like governance, community engagement, and resource use, rather than importing foreign criteria (Neema-Abooki, 2022). Latin American frameworks have emphasized social responsibility and public value. These models may be imperfect, and underfunded, but they gesture toward a more pluralistic horizon—one where rankings are not instruments of compliance, but invitations to conversation.

That shift—from control to dialogue—is perhaps the most radical, and most necessary. Current rankings speak *at* universities. A more inclusive system would speak *with* them. It would involve consultation, co-creation, iteration. It would accept that not everything worth knowing fits into a spreadsheet. That some truths are qualitative, situated, even resistant to quantification. That a university's moral courage, its role in peacebuilding, its stewardship of culture, might not be legible in global data sets—and yet still matter. And it would slow down.

The annual churn of rankings creates an academic culture obsessed with immediacy, with year-to-year fluctuations that say more about methodology changes than institutional transformation. A reflexive paradigm would value depth over speed. It would recognize that real change—pedagogical, structural, cultural—takes time. It wouldn't punish institutions for investing in the long term, or for pursuing goals that don't translate neatly into numbers. It would celebrate patience as much as progress.

There's also the question of who's behind the rankings. Most current systems are run by media companies, analytics firms, or think tanks with varying levels of academic credibility. A more inclusive model would be governed differently—perhaps through consortia of universities, regional networks, or independent academic bodies. It would be insulated from commercial pressures, transparent in its funding, open about its processes. It wouldn't need to sell subscriptions or consultancy services to the very institutions it evaluates.

It would also be porous—open to critique, to revision, to disruption. It would publish not just scores, but methodologies in plain language. It would allow institutions to respond, to explain, to contextualize. It would resist the temptation to rank for the sake of ranking. In some cases, it might refuse to rank at all, offering instead a profile, a narrative, a cluster map. Something that informs, rather than dictates.

Would such a system be messier? Certainly. Would it be harder to scale? Without question. But would it be fairer, more honest, more attuned to the richness of global higher education? Absolutely. And perhaps, most of all, it would be generative. Rankings now often induce anxiety, conformity, and disillusionment. A more inclusive framework could spark reflection, creativity, collaboration. It could encourage institutions to learn from each other not just by comparing numbers, but by understanding differences. It could create space for the weird, the experimental, the non-standard. It could allow excellence to be an ongoing question, rather than a fixed answer. But let's not be naïve. Power doesn't surrender easily. The current ranking regime is deeply entrenched—tied to funding streams, international student markets, national prestige (Ye, 2022). Challenging it will require more than critique. It will require coalition. Universities must speak up—not just the marginalized ones, but those at the top of the tables. Especially them. Because if those with influence continue to pretend that the status quo is acceptable, nothing will change. And change, slow though it may be, is possible. It begins with asking different questions. Not "How do we climb higher?" but "Why are we climbing?" Not "How do we look better?" but "Whom do we serve?" Not "How are we ranked?" but "Are we doing what matters?"

These aren't rhetorical flourishes. They are existential imperatives. Because higher education, at its best, is not a brand. It's a commitment—to knowledge, to justice, to a better world. Rankings should help us honor that commitment, not distract from it. If a new paradigm is to take root, it must be built not on competition, but on care. Care for truth. For plurality. For the slow labor of scholarship. For students who deserve more than prestige. For communities that need more than visibility. For a planet that demands more than metrics. That's not a utopian vision. It's a human one. And perhaps, finally, the only one worth pursuing.

CONCLUSION

The objectivity of university rankings is not merely a technical issue to be corrected with better metrics; it is a deeply philosophical and political question about what higher education is for—and who gets to define its value. As this chapter has argued, the promise of objectivity in university rankings is a seductive but ultimately fragile construct. What appears on the surface as an impartial system of comparison is, in practice, a complex amalgamation of value judgments, methodological choices, and cultural assumptions. Rankings are not neutral observers of academic

performance; they are actors within the system, shaping institutional behavior, global perceptions, and the allocation of resources.

The consequences of this dynamic are far-reaching. Institutions across the globe, whether elite or emerging, are increasingly compelled to play by the rules of the ranking game. This often means prioritizing publication in English-language journals, chasing citation counts, recruiting international students, and investing in visibility rather than mission-driven community engagement. For many universities—especially those in the Global South—this dynamic creates a dilemma: conform to a model that may misrepresent their priorities and cultural context or remain marginalized in the global discourse on academic excellence. In both cases, the result is a narrowing of what counts as valuable knowledge, often privileging a homogenized, market-oriented version of academia.

Moreover, the persistent reliance on rankings as proxies for quality obscures more meaningful questions: What do universities contribute to the societies they serve? How do they foster ethical reasoning, critical thinking, and social justice? What role do they play in cultivating local knowledge, preserving cultural heritage, or innovating outside of commercial paradigms? These dimensions, largely absent from current ranking models, are vital to a fuller understanding of institutional value—yet they resist easy quantification. This resistance is not a weakness but a strength, pointing to the inherent richness and irreducibility of higher education's mission.

To move forward, the debate must shift from how to perfect rankings to how to decenter them. This means embracing multi-dimensional frameworks that reflect diverse missions, stakeholder values, and cultural contexts. It means foregrounding qualitative assessments, participatory evaluations, and self-reflective practices. It means fostering systems that reward collaboration over competition, and depth over visibility. Such a paradigm shift will not be easy, especially in a world conditioned to trust numbers and simplified hierarchies. But it is necessary if we are to reclaim the purpose of higher education from the tyranny of metrics.

In closing, the objectivity of university rankings is not a settled fact but an ongoing struggle—a negotiation between ideals of fairness and the realities of power. By critically engaging with the architecture of these systems, we are not rejecting evaluation altogether. Rather, we are calling for a higher standard—one that is not satisfied with the mere appearance of objectivity, but one that seeks justice, context, and truth in how we assess the intellectual and social contributions of our academic institutions. Only then can we begin to imagine a global academic community that values difference as much as excellence, and ethics as much as efficiency.

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Chapter 3
Are University Rankings Fueling Academic Elitism?

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ABSTRACT

University rankings have become powerful gatekeepers of prestige, often shaping funding, student choices, and policy decisions. Yet, beneath their polished metrics lies a growing concern: are these rankings reinforcing academic elitism and widening the gap between privileged institutions and the rest? This chapter examines how global ranking systems, while claiming to promote excellence, may inadvertently entrench inequality, marginalize emerging universities, and overlook contextually valuable contributions. By unpacking the mechanisms through which rankings elevate a select few while creating barriers for others, the chapter invites a critical conversation about fairness, diversity, and the true purpose of higher education. It calls for a rethinking of how we measure quality—not by conformity to narrow indicators, but by embracing a broader, more equitable vision of academic excellence.

INTRODUCTION

In the global landscape of higher education, the pursuit of excellence has taken on a competitive, almost Darwinian character. University rankings—once seen as helpful tools for guiding student decisions or benchmarking institutional performance—have now become the de facto arbiters of academic prestige and influence (Depo, 2024). A university's place in a global ranking system can dictate its access to funding, international collaborations, top-tier faculty, and even national pride. What was once a means of evaluation has become an end in itself. Institutions now calibrate their

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missions, strategies, and identities not necessarily toward educational enrichment or community impact, but toward climbing a competitive ladder built on selective metrics. In this pursuit, a fundamental question arises: are university rankings fueling academic elitism?

Academic elitism, in this context, does not refer merely to excellence or specialization. Rather, it denotes a stratified model of higher education wherein a small cluster of globally recognized institutions are valorized, while the vast majority are either invisible or undervalued. This elitism is both structural and ideological. Structurally, rankings often rely on proxies that favor well-resourced, English-speaking, research-intensive universities—typically from the Global North (Jansen, 2023). These metrics—such as citation counts, faculty-student ratios, internationalization scores, or reputation surveys—rarely account for contextual realities, local missions, or the diversity of academic models across the world. Ideologically, the narrative of the "world-class university" has come to dominate policy frameworks, pushing governments and institutions to emulate a particular model, regardless of local needs or historical missions.

This homogenizing effect of rankings has several consequences. First, it promotes isomorphism—the tendency for institutions to imitate the behaviors of top-ranked universities. This often leads to a shift in priorities: community engagement, teaching quality, and access initiatives may be deprioritized in favor of research outputs that appeal to citation-based ranking algorithms. Second, rankings create a feedback loop of privilege. Elite institutions attract more funding, top researchers, and international students, which in turn boosts their metrics, further reinforcing their elite status (Bhopal & Myers, 2023). Meanwhile, emerging universities or those rooted in underserved communities struggle for recognition, regardless of their local impact or social innovation.

Moreover, the psychological and cultural dimensions of academic elitism should not be underestimated (Strømme & Wiborg, 2024). Faculty and students alike internalize ranking hierarchies, shaping their self-worth and aspirations according to their institutional affiliation. Job markets are influenced. Journal submissions are biased. Partnerships are selected. The very perception of what counts as "knowledge" is often filtered through a ranking lens that privileges Western, quantitative, and English-language outputs. In such a world, excellence becomes not a pluralistic idea, but a narrow, gatekept standard.

This chapter seeks to unpack the mechanisms through which university rankings contribute—intentionally or not—to the rise of academic elitism. It does not argue for the abolition of rankings per se, but for a critical re-examination of their purpose, design, and consequences. What values do rankings prioritize? Whose voices do they amplify—and whose do they ignore? How can we build ranking systems that

support equity, recognize diverse contributions, and empower institutions of all types to flourish?

In answering these questions, the chapter weaves together empirical insights, case studies, and theoretical reflections. It explores not only how rankings shape institutional behavior, but also how they influence the very imagination of what higher education should be. In a time of global upheaval, where inequality, exclusion, and epistemic injustice are pressing concerns, higher education must ask itself: will we continue to reward sameness, or will we champion diversity in form, purpose, and value?

The Prestige Paradox in Global Academia

There's something quietly unsettling about the way prestige operates in higher education today—subtle, pervasive, and often unchallenged. One might call it an academic sleight of hand: the global pursuit of excellence cloaked in neutrality, yet tightly wound around structures of power and hierarchy. University rankings sit at the center of this contradiction, offering the illusion of objectivity while functioning, more often than not, as instruments of reputational warfare (Welsh, 2021). Institutions are told they're in a race—though no one quite remembers who set the course, who defined the finish line, or why everyone's so desperate to win.

The prestige paradox begins here: in a sector ostensibly built on the values of openness, inquiry, and diversity of thought, we've come to accept a remarkably narrow definition of success. Global rankings, with their clinical grids and numerical certainties, promise a map—but what they often provide is a mirror, one that reflects and amplifies existing inequalities rather than revealing new pathways. The universities that top these charts tend to be those already equipped with historical capital, research infrastructure, endowments, and the linguistic advantage of publishing in English. The same names appear year after year—Harvard, Oxford, Stanford, MIT—like fixed stars in a sky others are told to navigate by. But here's the twist: these rankings, while supposedly benchmarking excellence, also produce it. Not in the organic, slow-burn sense of academic growth, but in the performative sense of becoming what the metric demands. Institutions reorient their priorities not because of local needs or intrinsic values, but to align with what the rankings reward. Research over teaching. STEM over humanities. International faculty over community engagement (Goldstein, 2021). Citations over impact. And all the while, universities without the means to game the system—or the desire to do so—are left in the cold, labeled as lower-tier, regional, or underperforming, even when they may be doing the kind of socially transformative work the world most urgently needs.

It's not hard to see how this feeds elitism. Ranking systems, by design, create a hierarchy, and hierarchies breed emulation (Kayyali, 2020). The logic of prestige

is mimetic: institutions imitate the elite, hoping to capture some of the magic dust. But imitation comes at a cost. What happens to institutional identity in this process? What happens to indigenous knowledge, to place-based learning, to the small college whose mission is to serve displaced communities or local ecosystems? More often than not, it gets trimmed, shaped, or buried under strategic plans that aim to chase rank rather than purpose. The system begins to cannibalize itself, as universities abandon what makes them unique in the scramble to look like the few at the top.

Of course, prestige is not inherently sinister. Nor is the desire for recognition inherently vain. Any institution worth its salt wants to be known, to be trusted, to attract talent. The trouble lies in what's been flattened in translation. Prestige, as operationalized by rankings, becomes a rigid code—less a celebration of excellence than a sorting algorithm for resources and status. And in the shadows of this process, entire continents of academic work risk invisibility. African universities pioneering sustainable development models. Latin American institutions advancing critical pedagogy (Dutra, 2025). Asian universities experimenting with digital equity. Their work may not be cited in *Nature* or featured in global reputation surveys, but it is no less worthy of celebration or support.

What makes this paradox even more poignant is how normalized it's become. Few within academia dare to challenge the rankings openly—partly because they're complicit, and partly because the systems feel too big to question (Kayyali, 2023 A). They shape hiring practices, funding flows, journal submissions, and institutional partnerships. They're embedded in national policy frameworks and international accreditation schemes. Even students, those supposedly outside the machinery, make life-altering decisions based on them. It's not unusual to find a teenager in Cairo or Jakarta obsessively comparing QS scores before applying, unaware of the cultural biases or data gaps embedded in the methodology.

There's also a kind of emotional undertow to all of this. Prestige has a way of seeping into the subconscious. Faculty at less-ranked institutions often speak of a quiet inferiority complex, a sense of being perpetually "behind," even when producing groundbreaking work. Students internalize these hierarchies too. They begin to measure their worth not by what they learn, but by where they learn it. And when policy-makers obsess over rankings, it signals to the public that certain universities are inherently more valuable than others—more deserving of investment, more trustworthy, more "global." The result? A two-tiered system masquerading as a meritocracy.

One of the deeper ironies here is that the academic world, which prides itself on critical thinking, has been surprisingly uncritical of the very structures that govern its prestige economy (DeVitis, 2023). The seductive clarity of rankings—the neat columns, the top tens, the statistical veneer—dulls our skepticism. It's easier to accept the numbers than to unpack the messy, contextual, deeply human stories

behind them. But if we pause long enough to ask, "What are we really measuring?" the cracks start to show. Can the quality of teaching be reduced to a staff-student ratio? Does the number of Nobel laureates really reflect a university's social value? And who decides which citations matter, or which journals count?

These aren't rhetorical flourishes—they're urgent questions. Because as long as prestige is defined by such narrow indicators, we risk distorting not just how universities are ranked, but how they behave. Imagine a world where every institution stops trying to be Harvard and starts trying to be *itself*—rooted, relevant, and responsive to the people it serves. Imagine a framework that rewards ecological stewardship, ethical leadership, indigenous knowledge preservation, or equitable access as much as it rewards publication volume or international branding. That kind of prestige—grounded in values rather than vanity—might actually serve the public good.

Still, change won't come easily. The prestige economy is sticky, and institutions have invested years—sometimes decades—into climbing the ladder. There are entire offices devoted to data optimization, rankings strategy, and global branding. And let's be honest: the media loves a good list. Rankings sell. They simplify complexity. They satisfy our craving for competition, for clarity, for a story with winners and losers (Schneider & Hutt, 2023). In this sense, the prestige paradox is cultural as much as it is structural. It plays to our collective obsession with hierarchy. But perhaps the only way out is through—through a deeper reckoning with what higher education is supposed to be. Not just a marketplace of credentials or a research machine, but a site of ethical imagination. A space where knowledge serves not the rankings, but the world. That means rethinking how we measure impact, how we define success, and how we tell the story of academic life in all its rich, untidy, and context-bound complexity.

Prestige will always be part of the academic ecosystem (Pinheiro, 2023). But it doesn't have to be the sun around which everything orbits. It can be one constellation among many, not a monolith but a mosaic—dynamic, diverse, and open to redefinition. Until then, the paradox remains: the more we chase a singular vision of excellence, the more we risk impoverishing the very landscape we seek to elevate.

The Architecture of Rankings: Metrics, Incentives, and Exclusion

Beneath the glossy marketing campaigns, the triumphant social media posts celebrating institutional climb, and the meticulously engineered graphs that compare this year's leap to last year's plateau, there lies a quieter, more mechanical story—one that is almost architectural in nature. The structure of university rankings, for all their claims to neutrality, is anything but innocent. It is built, brick by brick, from

a particular worldview: one that favors certain types of knowledge, certain kinds of institutions, and certain definitions of value. And once you begin to examine this structure—not just the results it spits out, but the bones beneath—you start to see the asymmetries it quietly normalizes.

To build a ranking system is to make a series of choices. Which metrics to include, how to weight them, where to collect data, and what counts as credible evidence—all of these are decisions shaped by assumptions, politics, and implicit cultural biases (Wut et al, 2022). The dominant global ranking systems—QS, Times Higher Education, ARWU (Shanghai), U.S. News Global—tend to converge on a set of familiar pillars: research output, faculty reputation, student-staff ratio, internationalization, and citations (Polyakov et al, 2022). On the surface, it all seems rather tidy. But tidiness in measurement often comes at the expense of complexity, and complexity is where real education lives.

Take citations, for example. A seemingly objective proxy for research influence—until you scratch beneath the surface. Citation databases are notoriously skewed toward English-language journals, disproportionately representing research published in Western contexts (Asubiaro et al, 2024). They favor the sciences over the humanities, quantitative methodologies over qualitative inquiry, and high-frequency, high-visibility journals over those that serve local or niche audiences. This isn't a bug—it's a feature. The architecture was designed to spotlight a certain kind of academic voice: one that speaks the lingua franca of global science, plays by the rules of impact factors, and aims for journals whose gates are guarded by elite institutions.

Then there's the notorious "reputation survey" component—used heavily by QS and THE—where academics and employers are asked to name institutions they consider to be the best (Qazi & Al-Mhdawi, 2025). At first glance, it looks like a democratic gesture, but reputational surveys are perhaps the most circular element of all. Recognition begets recognition. The more famous a university is, the more likely it is to be named, regardless of actual quality or performance. It's a feedback loop masquerading as data. The institutions that have historically dominated the public imagination continue to be rewarded for simply being known. Visibility becomes mistaken for value. And what about the internationalization metric? Another seemingly progressive gesture, right? But the way it's measured—usually by counting international students and faculty—reduces complex questions of diversity, inclusion, and global engagement to numbers on a spreadsheet. A university in an impoverished or conflict-affected region, serving displaced populations or operating under geopolitical sanctions, may be profoundly international in mission and outlook, yet score abysmally (Ivanenko et al, 2024). Meanwhile, a wealthy university in a tourist-friendly city can boost its scores simply by admitting more passport holders. There's no nuance, no understanding of context. Just a headcount.

This is the architecture we're dealing with—a structure that rewards institutions not for doing what matters, but for aligning with what's legible to the system. And once the incentives are set, behavior follows. Strategic planning documents start to mimic ranking criteria. Universities launch offices specifically tasked with "ranking optimization." Resources get redirected to activities that boost metrics, sometimes at the cost of things that are harder to measure but no less essential—like student mentorship, ethical leadership, or community partnerships.

There's something quietly tragic about it. A university that once rooted itself in serving its community starts eyeing the global stage. It stops publishing in regional journals. It pushes faculty toward high-impact publications (Mills et al, 2023). It replaces local languages with English in official communications. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, it stops being what it was, chasing a kind of global legitimacy that's always just a few points away. And if you ask who benefits most from this transformation, the answer is rarely the students, or the society, or even the faculty. It's the ranking system itself—an ecosystem that thrives on institutional anxiety and perpetual comparison.

Of course, some might argue: isn't measurement necessary? Don't we need a way to compare institutions, to ensure accountability, to guide decision-making? The answer isn't no. But measurement without context becomes surveillance. And comparison without care becomes coercion. The problem is not that metrics exist, but that they've been elevated to gospel. They've become the grammar of legitimacy. And in the process, they exclude. Quietly, efficiently, and often invisibly.

Who gets left behind? First, the small institutions—the liberal arts colleges, the teaching-focused universities, the rural campuses doing the hard, slow work of educational access. These places don't generate the research volume to compete. They don't attract global headlines. But they are, in many cases, the backbone of national education systems. Then there are institutions in the Global South—those working under resource constraints, political instability, or postcolonial recovery. Their work is often undervalued not because it lacks substance, but because it doesn't fit the metric mold. They're asked to play a game designed by others, with rules that reward a kind of academic cosmopolitanism that's not always attainable or even desirable. Exclusion happens at the epistemic level too. Certain types of knowledge get marginalized—oral traditions, indigenous scholarship, local history, community-based research (Melo, 2025). If it doesn't come with citations, it doesn't count. If it's not peer-reviewed in a top-tier journal, it vanishes from the data pool. And just like that, entire ways of knowing are rendered invisible by the very systems that claim to map the terrain of knowledge production.

This isn't just an issue of fairness—it's a crisis of imagination. When universities begin to see themselves through the narrow lens of rankings, they stop asking different questions (Schneider & Hutt, 2023). They stop innovating. They stop dreaming

strange, beautiful, local dreams. Instead, they try to perfect the template handed to them. In doing so, higher education risks becoming less a garden of intellectual diversity and more a monoculture of ambition—efficient, glossy, and profoundly limited. And yet, the system persists. Why? Because it's convenient. It offers clarity in a world full of noise. Governments use rankings to justify funding decisions. Students use them to make life choices. Institutions use them to validate their ambitions (Adam, 2021). Even critics often fall back on them. It's hard to break free from a language that everyone's already speaking. But perhaps the first step is to see the architecture clearly. Not to smash it with a sledgehammer, but to sketch its contours, trace its biases, and begin to imagine what might be built in its place. What would it look like to design metrics that valued care work in academia? Or that recognized the richness of multilingual publication? Or that measured impact not just by reach but by relevance? What if we stopped ranking institutions altogether and started mapping them—in all their differences, overlaps, contradictions, and strengths?

Such questions may seem utopian. But then again, higher education was never meant to be a marketplace. It was meant to be a sanctuary for thinking, a commons for learning, a space where value could be defined in more than just economic or reputational terms. To rebuild that vision, we'll need to reexamine the architecture—not just renovate the facade. And that begins by asking what kind of world our metrics are making. Not every university needs to be a cathedral of global research. Some are more like local bridges, connecting people, languages, and futures. Some are experimental spaces. Others are shelters. Each has its place. But under the current architecture, only one blueprint gets rewarded. That, right there, is the problem.

The Rise of Academic Elitism: Winners, Losers, and the Shrinking Middle

There's a quiet sorting underway—subtle, systemic, and easy to miss unless you're looking closely. A drift in the academic tide that doesn't crash like a wave but pulls steadily, insidiously, creating new currents of privilege and marginalization. What began as a global quest for excellence has gradually hardened into something else—something more exclusionary, more stratified. It has birthed an academic caste system dressed in the language of meritocracy. Rankings, far from being neutral instruments, have emerged as accelerants of this process, drawing a line that separates the "world-class" from the rest, even when the differences are more imagined than real.

The idea of "academic elitism" isn't new, but it's morphing. Historically, elite institutions were defined by legacy, geography, wealth—things you could point to on a map or trace in a ledger (Bashir et al, 2022). Today, the elite are being crowned and recrowned through metrics: a university's position in a table of reputation

scores, publication outputs, or international enrollments. It sounds empirical, but it's profoundly theatrical. A global stage where the script is pre-written and only a few actors get the best lines. Once you're in the spotlight, it's easier to stay there. The rest? Bit parts, fading out at the edge of the stage.

It's not just that the top universities get the glory. It's that they get everything else with it—talent, funding, visibility, autonomy, even regulatory leniency. And those that don't make the cut? They become invisible, sometimes even to themselves. This is the twisted genius of the ranking logic: it doesn't just classify institutions—it reorders their internal self-understanding. A university once proud of its regional mission begins to feel ashamed of it. A rector stops talking about community engagement and starts talking about "impact factors." Whole institutions pivot, not out of strategy, but out of existential anxiety.

Winners in this new world aren't merely lucky; they are recursively rewarded. They attract elite faculty and students not just because of the quality they already possess, but because of the symbolic capital that comes from being ranked. Students apply based on prestige (Kayyali, 2023 B). Donors give based on visibility. Governments invest based on comparative advantage. And faculty, particularly those trying to build careers in precarious labor markets, target institutions where their CVs will glow more brightly. What unfolds is a kind of academic gravity: prestige begets prestige, and the system keeps feeding itself, oblivious to what gets left behind. But let's pause here. What exactly is being lost in the margins?

First, the middle is hollowing out. Universities that are neither globally elite nor locally protected are squeezed into a space of quiet erosion (Fleming, 2021). These aren't underperforming institutions by any stretch—many are vibrant, innovative, committed to public good—but they lack the brand clout or political insulation to resist the tide. They're often compelled to mimic the behavior of the elite, not because it fits their mission, but because the rankings demand it (Grolleau & Meunier, 2024). They build research centers that no one uses. They push publications over pedagogy. They chase international partnerships for the photo ops. Slowly, their core starts to fray. And then there are the outright losers. The institutions serving rural populations, refugee communities, post-conflict societies. The ones building capacity in places the global spotlight rarely shines. These are not failures. They are, in many cases, the heroes of higher education—holding the line where state infrastructure has collapsed, where private profit has retreated, where no "top 100" university has ever dared to go. Yet they are punished by the metrics. Penalized for low citation counts, for lack of international staff, for not teaching in English, for serving people whom the algorithms don't know how to value.

Academic elitism isn't just about who gets ahead. It's about who gets erased (Hughes, 2021). Consider a small university in West Africa training local teachers in indigenous languages. It will never score high on international rankings, but its

societal value is immeasurable. Or a polytechnic in Central Asia that prioritizes practical knowledge over peer-reviewed publishing—its students go on to build real things, fix real problems. But rankings don't reward that. They don't know how. So these institutions are left out of the global conversation, marked as irrelevant by a system that doesn't speak their language or understand their purpose.

What's insidious is that the very concept of "excellence" has been narrowed to fit the contours of this elite model. Excellence no longer means solving real problems, fostering ethical graduates, or sustaining cultural knowledge (Stylianidis, 2025). It means research dollars. It means citations in English-language journals. It means faculty with degrees from already-ranked universities. It means being recognized by systems that don't know how to see beyond themselves. And as this idea spreads, it reshapes everything. Governments start allocating funding based on rank movements, not societal need. Ministries push universities to internationalize without asking whether local communities are being served. Students internalize the idea that only a degree from a ranked university counts. And parents, desperate for upward mobility, mortgage futures for names they can't pronounce but have seen on lists.

It goes deeper still. The job market becomes complicit. Employers privilege graduates from top-ranked institutions, regardless of actual skills. Journals bias their editorial decisions based on university affiliations (González-Sauri & Rossello, 2023). Conferences invite speakers not for ideas but for institutional cachet. It all feeds into a self-fulfilling logic: if prestige defines quality, then prestige becomes quality. And quality without prestige? It's pushed to the margins, or worse, ignored altogether.

Of course, there's resistance—quiet, determined, often unglamorous. Faculty who choose to stay at "unranked" institutions because of the mission. Students who turn down elite admissions to stay close to their communities. Universities that refuse to submit data to ranking agencies on principle. But this resistance is swimming upstream (Bok, 2024). Because the logic of elitism has institutionalized itself so thoroughly, so convincingly, that even its victims sometimes defend it. "We need to move up the rankings," says the vice chancellor, "or no one will take us seriously." And so, the arms race continues. Universities hire branding consultants. They tweak course descriptions to sound more international (Kostogriz et al, 2022). They build glossy websites in English. They invest in faculty with high h-indices over those with high moral integrity. They pay for SEO optimization on research outputs. All this, not necessarily to improve education, but to become legible—to be seen, to be counted, to not fall off the map.

What's missing in this picture is humility. And memory. We forget that many of today's elite universities weren't always so. They grew under conditions of privilege: colonial wealth, state patronage, linguistic dominance. They didn't climb—they were lifted. And now, they sit atop the ladder pulling it up behind them, as though their

status were purely meritocratic. It's a story we've told so often it feels true. But it's fiction. And dangerous fiction at that.

The real tragedy, though, is that this rise in elitism is occurring precisely when the world needs higher education to do the opposite. In a time of climate collapse, rising authoritarianism, mass displacement, and epistemic fragility, we need more institutions doing slow, difficult, grounded work. We need universities that are embedded, not aloof. Responsive, not performative. Collaborative, not extractive. But the ranking-driven logic of elitism pushes us in the other direction. It makes universities chase status instead of impact, visibility instead of virtue.

What might it look like to reverse this trend? To reinvest in the middle? To honor the margins? To design a higher education ecosystem where prestige doesn't determine value, but value determines prestige? That's not a rhetorical flourish (Topaler & Ayvaz-Çavdaroğlu, 2022). It's a call. Because unless something shifts—unless we stop rewarding sameness and start celebrating difference—higher education risks becoming a mirror of inequality rather than a mechanism to challenge it. The rise of academic elitism isn't inevitable. But right now, it is accelerating (Scott, 2024). And unless we find the courage to rethink how value is defined, measured, and distributed, we will be left with a world of education that serves the few, flatters the powerful, and forgets the rest. And then, when we ask why innovation is stalling, why communities feel betrayed, or why universities have lost the public's trust—we may need only look at the rankings, and the ruin they leave behind.

Equity and Access in the Shadow of Rankings

It begins quietly, often imperceptibly. A government policy gets rewritten. A university marketing brochure changes tone. A scholarship program quietly disappears (Pasquarelli et al, 2023). The shift is subtle, not seismic—but the implications ripple outward, gathering force. Somewhere, a rural student loses their footing in a system that has chosen visibility over reach. Elsewhere, a small, teaching-focused university in a low-income region is told that it's not "competitive" enough for inclusion in a global initiative. And so it goes—again and again—until what's left is a higher education system where access is filtered through prestige, and equity becomes a polite afterthought in the race for global recognition.

The language of rankings doesn't speak fluently about equity. It mumbles, stutters, occasionally gestures toward "diversity" and "inclusion" through headcounts of international faculty or gender ratios among students, but it doesn't really listen to what equity actually requires: structural redress, cultural transformation, redistribution of resources, and an unflinching confrontation with historical exclusion. Instead, it prefers numbers that can be charted, trends that can be plotted, and metrics that fit neatly into dashboards. But equity—true equity—is messy, contextual, sometimes

slow, and always human. It rarely conforms to metrics built in boardrooms thousands of miles away from the institutions they seek to measure.

Access, too, has become a double-edged promise. On the surface, the expansion of higher education globally seems to suggest progress: more students enrolled than ever before, more mobility, more credentials, more open doors (LeBlanc, 2021). But when examined under the cold light of rankings-driven incentives, this expansion often reveals itself to be lopsided. Access becomes stratified. The top-tier universities, emboldened by their rankings, become increasingly selective, expensive, and exclusive—gatekeepers of opportunity rather than gateways to it. Meanwhile, the responsibility for broad-based inclusion is pushed onto underfunded institutions with little recognition, few resources, and immense pressure to deliver results with shrinking support.

There's a cruel irony here: universities that make the most difference in terms of access are often the least celebrated. The institution that provides affordable education to first-generation students, the one that offers bridge programs for displaced youth, the college that admits students without standardized test scores but trains them into capable contributors to society—these rarely score high on any ranking. And why would they? Their work doesn't translate into high-impact publications. Their faculty may not be widely cited, but they are often deeply embedded in the lives of their students, mentoring, encouraging, advocating. Their classrooms may not be filled with international students, but they are rich in lived experience, local wisdom, and untapped brilliance.

This is the shadow cast by rankings: a world in which equity and access become liabilities rather than virtues. A university that chooses to admit more students from disadvantaged backgrounds may see its student-faculty ratio worsen (Buckner & Zhang, 2021). A college that invests in teaching rather than research may be penalized for low citation counts. A campus that teaches in a local language to ensure comprehension and inclusion may be marked down for lacking internationalization. It's a perverse logic that equates fairness with inefficiency, inclusion with mediocrity, and diversity with dilution of quality. And it's not just institutions that bear the brunt. Students themselves are caught in the crossfire of this prestige war. The narrative around "top universities" shapes aspirations, perceptions of self-worth, and even economic futures (Kang, 2023). A degree from a highly ranked university can open doors that remain stubbornly closed to others—even when the difference in actual education quality is negligible. Employers scan CVs not for what was learned but for where it was learned. Families, sometimes entire communities, invest heavily—financially and emotionally—in sending a child to a "global brand" university, often overlooking more contextually appropriate, supportive, or affordable options closer to home.

For students from marginalized backgrounds, the picture is even more complex. Entering a ranked institution doesn't guarantee belonging. It can often mean navigating hostile academic cultures, elitist expectations, or subtle forms of exclusion. Curricula are often Eurocentric, pedagogies unfamiliar, support structures thin (Arday et al, 2021). Many are left feeling like imposters in spaces that were not designed with them in mind. And those who remain in local institutions—whether by choice or constraint—face a different kind of erasure: the quiet suggestion that their education is somehow second-rate because it wasn't delivered within the walls of a top-ranked campus.

What emerges is a stratified system masquerading as global opportunity. It promises upward mobility, but often reinforces the very hierarchies it claims to transcend. The rich get richer—academically, financially, reputationally. The middle stretches itself thin trying to keep up. And the bottom? The bottom risks becoming invisible.

This is not to romanticize access for its own sake. Access without quality is its own kind of betrayal (Kayyali, 2023 C). But the problem isn't that equity and access are incompatible with excellence—it's that they've been framed as opposites. The very idea that a university cannot be both inclusive and excellent is a fiction manufactured by systems that reward scarcity, not generosity. True excellence lies in a university's ability to lift as many as it can, to teach with depth and compassion, to conduct research that matters to those who need it most. But such excellence is rarely rewarded by rankings. It's too quiet, too rooted in local soil, too resistant to commodification.

Even funding mechanisms have internalized this bias. Development aid, international partnerships, philanthropic grants—many of these are distributed based on ranking indicators. A university in the Global South may be overlooked for support simply because it doesn't appear on the radar of ranking agencies, despite its urgent work in public health, education, or social justice (Lloyd & Ordorika, 2021). Rankings thus become not just reflections of inequality, but instruments of it. They shape where money goes, who gets heard, which problems get studied, and whose solutions are considered legitimate.

It's worth asking—who gets to define access in this context? Whose vision of equity are we privileging? Is it the equity that brings students into the system, only to push them toward conformity? Or the kind that transforms institutions to meet the students where they are? Is access about numbers, or is it about dismantling barriers—financial, linguistic, cultural, epistemic? These are questions that rankings cannot answer. They are too complex, too situated, too ethical. But they must be asked if higher education is to mean anything beyond credentialing.

In the current environment, even well-meaning initiatives can be co-opted by ranking logic. Take scholarship programs aimed at underrepresented students. When universities begin to showcase these efforts as part of branding rather than commit-

ment, access becomes spectacle (Schlesinger et al, 2023). Or international student recruitment—what begins as a gesture of global inclusion can quickly morph into a commercial enterprise, privileging those who can pay over those who need. And so the shadows lengthen.

There's also a temporal dimension to this crisis. Equity and access work best when viewed as long-term investments. It takes time to nurture students from disadvantaged backgrounds, to build inclusive pedagogies, to reshape cultures. But rankings reward speed. Annual shifts. Immediate returns. It creates a mismatch—between what equity requires and what the system rewards. As a result, universities are disincentivized from doing the slow, hard work of transformation. They chase metrics instead.

Yet in all this, there remains a stubborn hope. Because despite the distortions, many universities continue to resist. They quietly prioritize access in ways that are not always visible. They develop contextual admission policies. They expand evening programs. They build partnerships with local schools. They invest in faculty training for inclusive teaching. They listen. They adapt. They don't always get credit for it—but they do it anyway. Not because a ranking demands it, but because it's the right thing to do. And perhaps that is the clearest sign that equity still has a heartbeat in higher education: it persists, often in the shadows, against the grain. It lives in policies not advertised, in classrooms not photographed, in students who stay and succeed despite the odds. But it cannot survive indefinitely in the margins. It must be brought into the light. What would it take to do that? Not just tokenistic gestures, but a reimagination of what counts as academic value. A ranking system that includes social justice impact. A funding model that rewards inclusion (Zehlike et al, 2022). A curriculum that centers the knowledge of the marginalized. A global academic community that treats access not as a footnote, but as its central moral claim.

Until that shift occurs, rankings will continue to cast long shadows (Ringel, 2021). And in those shadows, equity will remain something whispered about at conferences, footnoted in strategic plans, celebrated one day a year—and forgotten the rest. But perhaps, just perhaps, if enough people start turning toward the light, the architecture of higher education might begin to tilt. Not toward uniformity, but toward fairness. Not toward prestige, but toward purpose. That would be a ranking worth aspiring to.

Towards a More Inclusive Academic Future: Reimagining the Purpose of Rankings

There's something oddly comforting about a list. Neatly ordered, hierarchically arranged, tidy in its promise to make the complex more manageable. And that's what university rankings do, or at least claim to do: distill the sprawling, chaotic world

of higher education into a single number, a place in line, a rank on the ladder. But behind that apparent clarity lies a world of distortions—of values oversimplified, of contexts ignored, of excellence flattened into something easily digestible but deeply misrepresentative. The question, then, is not whether to have rankings, but whether we can imagine—and build—rankings that do more good than harm. Ones that amplify inclusion rather than suppress it. Ones that reflect the wild, plural, uneven beauty of higher education instead of forcing it into a single mold.

It's not an easy ask. Rankings have become embedded in the bloodstream of global academia, not just as tools but as norms, as expectations, even as aspirations (Gonzales & Núñez, 2021). Students consult them before applying, policymakers cite them in speeches, vice chancellors lose sleep over them. They've become shorthand for quality, even though everyone knows that quality is far too slippery, too context-bound, too deeply human to be captured by a set of quantitative proxies. Still, we keep pretending (Kayyali, 2023 D). We keep chasing numbers and calling it progress. But maybe the time has come to call that bluff. Not out of cynicism, but out of hope. Because what's at stake here isn't just methodology—it's imagination. If we can't imagine alternatives to the current system, we're trapped in a cycle that rewards sameness, punishes difference, and sidelines the very institutions doing the most urgent, transformative work. So maybe we start small, not with demolition, but with redesign.

What if rankings stopped pretending to be universal and started being plural? What if there wasn't just one ranking, but many—each tailored to different missions, values, and contexts? A ranking for community engagement. Another for teaching innovation (Sibhensana & Maistry, 2023). A third for environmental sustainability. A fourth for supporting first-generation students. Let institutions choose which ones to engage with, based on their actual goals, rather than contorting themselves to fit someone else's metric. In other words, let rankings reflect diversity rather than erode it.

Of course, someone will argue that this just introduces noise. But maybe a little noise is good. Maybe it reminds us that education is not a commodity to be standardized, but a living practice rooted in place, people, and purpose. Maybe noise is a sign of vitality, not confusion. The real question isn't how to eliminate complexity—it's how to live with it honestly.

Rethinking the purpose of rankings also means rethinking what we value. Right now, the dominant indicators are skewed toward what's easy to count: citations, faculty-student ratios, international enrollments (Buckner & Zhang, 2021). But what about what's hard to count? What about the warmth of mentorship? The courage to challenge orthodoxy? The commitment to preserve endangered languages? The ingenuity of rural innovation? These things matter, profoundly. They shape lives.

They shape futures. But they disappear in the current logic of rankings—not because they're unimportant, but because they're unmeasurable by the tools we've inherited.

It doesn't have to be that way. Qualitative indicators can be designed. Narrative assessments can be included. Peer review processes can be broadened. Even the act of trying to measure these dimensions sends a powerful message: that inclusion, care, and context matter. That excellence is not a synonym for exclusivity. And perhaps it's time to widen the circle of who gets to build these systems. At present, the architecture of rankings is controlled by a small handful of organizations—mostly private, mostly headquartered in the Global North, mostly operating with opaque methodologies and limited accountability. Why not open up the process? Involve students, faculty, policymakers, community partners. Build in mechanisms for feedback, revision, contestation. Let rankings evolve, not behind closed doors, but in public dialogue. Transparency isn't just a technical fix—it's an ethical imperative.

There's also room to rethink the temporality of rankings. Right now, they operate on annual cycles, reinforcing short-term thinking and perpetual motion. But meaningful change—especially the kind that enhances inclusion—takes time. What would it look like to have five-year rankings? Or rankings that reward steady improvement rather than sudden leaps? That value resilience, sustainability, integrity? The current model incentivizes sprinting. But education is a marathon. Sometimes even a quiet walk. And here's a harder, more uncomfortable thought: maybe not every institution needs to be ranked (Montgomery, 2023). Maybe the idea that everyone must be placed on the same ladder is part of the problem. Some universities are experimental. Others are healing. Some are small by design. Others work in languages that global indices ignore. Forcing them into a competitive hierarchy doesn't uplift them—it erases what makes them distinct. What if we could recognize and support excellence without ranking it? Celebrate it without reducing it?

This isn't about being soft. It's about being serious—serious about building a system that serves the full range of human needs, not just the narrow demands of prestige. It means asking hard questions: who benefits from the current system? Who loses? What possibilities are foreclosed when we reduce education to competition? And what might open up if we approached it instead as collaboration?

To be clear, rankings aren't going away anytime soon. They're too entrenched, too profitable, too seductive. But their power can be softened. Their influence can be tempered. Their structure can be shifted, gently but decisively, toward a different horizon. That horizon is one in which universities are not measured by how well they imitate the elite, but by how deeply they honor their mission (Murphy et al, 2025). One in which a small college in the Andes serving indigenous women is seen as no less vital than a research powerhouse in Silicon Valley. One in which students choose institutions not because of their place on a list, but because of alignment, care, belonging. One in which rankings, if they exist, are tools—not weapons.

Getting there will take courage. It will mean admitting that what we've built isn't working as well as we pretend. It will mean listening to those long ignored: the deans of regional universities, the faculty in underfunded departments, the students who don't fit the ranking mold. It will mean letting go of some cherished illusions—about merit, about objectivity, about what counts. But it will also be liberating. It will allow higher education to breathe again, to remember its deeper calling—not just to produce knowledge, but to democratize it. Not just to compete, but to connect. Not just to rise, but to reach. And maybe, in the end, that's the most radical thing rankings could do: to stop ranking and start recognizing. To honor difference without sorting it. To illuminate the ecosystem without stratifying it. To see, really see, the full, messy, miraculous spectrum of what universities are, and what they might become. That future is not yet written. But it's within reach—if we're willing to stop climbing, and start imagining.

CONCLUSION

As this chapter has shown, the widespread use of university rankings as proxies for institutional worth has brought with it a host of unintended consequences—foremost among them, the entrenchment of academic elitism. The very architecture of ranking systems tends to reward historical privilege, resource abundance, and alignment with Western academic norms. In doing so, they risk narrowing the global vision of what constitutes a meaningful and valuable university, and instead promote a model that is exclusive, monocultural, and largely inaccessible to the majority of institutions worldwide.

This is not to suggest that excellence should be abandoned, nor that evaluation is inherently flawed. Rather, the point is that excellence cannot be fully understood through a single, universalized lens. The notion that world-class quality only manifests in high-impact journal articles, research grants, or faculty reputation scores undermines the equally vital roles of teaching, community service, cultural preservation, and local innovation. Rankings that fail to acknowledge these dimensions do not just distort institutional incentives—they distort our collective understanding of what higher education is for (Kayyali, 2023 E). To address these imbalances, we must reimagine the very foundations of academic assessment. Ranking systems should move from being instruments of competition to tools of collective improvement. This means designing frameworks that recognize contextual differences, value qualitative and community-based contributions, and actively seek to uplift institutions that serve marginalized or nontraditional populations. It means embracing a more pluralistic approach to academic merit, one that resists reducing diverse missions to uniform benchmarks.

Furthermore, universities themselves must interrogate their complicity in sustaining elitist hierarchies. Strategic plans, marketing narratives, and internal performance metrics are often molded around ranking ambitions. This pursuit can lead to a dangerous erosion of institutional identity and purpose. Instead of imitating elite models, institutions must be empowered to define their own visions of success—rooted in local relevance, social responsibility, and epistemic inclusivity.

At the policy level, governments and funding bodies should critically examine how rankings influence investment decisions and institutional evaluations. Rather than tying resources to rank movements, they should support ecosystem-wide growth—investing in capacity-building, cross-border collaboration, and underrepresented knowledge systems. Rankings should be one reference point among many, not the singular compass guiding entire national strategies.

Ultimately, the deeper issue at stake is not about metrics, but about values. The debate over university rankings is a reflection of broader questions: What kind of knowledge do we elevate? Whose voices do we listen to? What role should universities play in a just and sustainable world? If we allow a narrow set of indicators to define institutional excellence, we risk building an academic system that is efficient but inequitable, globally connected but locally disconnected, excellent on paper but limited in purpose.

This chapter calls for a radical shift—not away from rigor, but toward inclusion. Not away from ambition, but toward balance. Rankings will likely remain a fixture in the academic landscape. But their power must be tempered by critical scrutiny, ethical design, and a commitment to honoring the rich, varied, and often invisible labor of institutions that defy elite molds.

Only then can we reclaim higher education as a space of possibility—not just for the top 100, but for all who dare to educate, discover, and serve with integrity.

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Chapter 4
When Numbers Replace Knowledge:
The West, the Rest, and the Ranking in Global Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary belief in global university rankings rests on an unnoticed presupposition: that institutions of higher learning can be evaluated, compared, and ordered according to universally applicable criteria. This chapter sets out to show that such a presupposition is not a neutral or objective truth, but the product of a specifically European experience of knowledge and education. Ranking—as a practice—presupposes that knowledge is measurable, institutions are comparable, and excellence is a position on a scale. These assumptions, however, are not shared across civilizations. The chapter argues that the logic of ranking is intelligible only within the cognitive framework that emerged in Europe, one that equated knowledge with textuality, formality, and institutional hierarchy. This chapter interrogates the very idea that academic value can be captured by metrics. In doing so, it points toward the possibility of alternative modes of valuing knowledge, rooted not in universal standards, but in the plural experiences of learning across cultures.

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INTRODUCTION

In the early 21st-century university, few ideas are as taken-for-granted as the global ranking. Each year, institutions anxiously await their position on league tables; administrators celebrate modest climbs or agonize over drops. To not be ranked, or to rank poorly, is to risk irrelevance. Indeed, "to ignore your university's ranking is to become invisible" in today's competitive academic landscape (Stack, 2021). This near-universal obsession with rankings makes the practice appear natural – as if assigning a number to a university's "excellence" were an obvious and objective exercise. But why should it be so? Why do we instinctively equate the quality of higher education with quantitative metrics and ordered lists? This chapter begins by mounting a reflective critique of that very assumption. It argues that the reign of rankings in global higher education is not a neutral or inevitable development, but the product of a particular cultural experience of knowledge. In short, our trust in numbered rankings is a cognitive habit of Western modernity, exported worldwide under the guise of universal rationality.

Modern societies often equate numbers with objectivity. As historian Theodore Porter observed, contemporary public life "is based on trust in numbers. They are commonly accepted as the means to achieving objectivity in analysis" (Porter, 1995). Nowhere is this more evident than in higher education, where complex realities of teaching, learning, and inquiry are collapsed into numerical surrogates. University rankings purport to measure "excellence" by counting papers, citations, faculty, students, and surveys – reducing a multidimensional educational ethos to a single index. Because numbers carry an aura of scientific impartiality, such rankings feel reassuringly concrete. A university ranked #50 seems better than one ranked #500, with a certainty akin to saying 50 is higher than 500 on a number line. The quantification of quality lends an air of mechanical objectivity to what might otherwise be a messy, qualitative judgment (Ravetz, 1997).

The idea that all universities can be placed on a single global scale of merit is rooted in historically specific notions of knowledge and value – notions that emerged from Europe's unique trajectory and later spread through colonialism and globalization. This chapter introduces the concept of "ranking as a cognitive category," to explain how the practice of ranking arises from a particular cultural way of thinking that privileges quantification, textual knowledge, and hierarchy. From there, we examine the major global ranking systems (QS, Times Higher Education, and ARWU) to show how they reinforce these underlying assumptions and, in turn, reshape institutional behavior around the world. The responses of Indian universities will be analyzed as a telling case: faced with global rankings, they have rushed to adapt through metric-driven publication practices, citation cartels, and even toleration of fake or predatory journals – often with perverse consequences (Dora & Kampa,

2023). We will discuss the paradox that even discourses on indigenous knowledge in India occur largely within a Western academic framework, illustrating the depth of colonial influence on our categories of thought (Kummangal et al., 2024).

This chapter argues that non-European cultures have struggled to critically interrogate ranking systems not because of any intellectual deficit, but because such systems are fundamentally alien to their cultural experience. Lacking an indigenous category for "ranking" in the Western sense, societies like India often either accept global rankings at face value or mount only superficial critiques (usually complaining about bias or methodology rather than questioning the concept itself). Comparative data will be presented – contrasting, for example, the fortunes of Indian vs. European institutions under ranking regimes – to demonstrate the real-world consequences of adopting ranking logics. These consequences ripple through faculty hiring, research funding allocation, student enrollment decisions, and the overall commodification of knowledge and education.

This is a call for a re-thinking of academic excellence beyond the metrics. Global rankings, we contend, are not neutral evaluators but culturally contingent constructs that carry the imprint of one civilization's worldview. Recognizing this is the first step toward epistemic pluralism – developing alternative, civilizationally grounded ways of recognizing and fostering excellence in higher education. Such a move is not an exercise in cultural relativism (as in "everyone just uses their own standard"), but rather a demand for cognitive honesty: an admission that what we have taken as a universal measure is in fact a parochial one. Only with this honesty can we begin to imagine new frameworks that honor diverse traditions of knowledge while holding institutions accountable to the communities they serve. In the sections that follow, we delve into each of these points in detail, beginning with the European origins of our present faith in numbers.

The European Epistemological Foundations of Ranking

Why do ranking systems feel so intuitively right to us today? To answer this, we must travel back to the intellectual soil in which the idea of ranking universities could take root – the epistemological foundations of Europe. The practice of evaluating and ordering institutions by quantitative criteria is not objective or universal; it is a product of the West's distinctive approach to knowledge. Three interrelated features of the European experience are key here: text-based knowledge, measurability, and institutionalization.

First, European traditions since classical times have heavily emphasized text as the vehicle of knowledge – whether scriptures, classical treatises, or printed books. To know was to engage with the written word, to produce commentaries, to store wisdom in libraries. Other cultures certainly had texts, but Europe made textual

scholarship a primary criterion of learned status. By the Enlightenment, Europe's intellectuals imagined an ordered "republic of letters" linking scholars and books across the continent. The Protestant Reformation in Europe did not merely fragment the Church; it introduced a cognitive revolution. In rejecting the authority of the Catholic Church and its interpretive traditions, Protestant reformers turned to a singular source: the text of the Bible. Sola scriptura—the idea that all divine truth is contained within the written word—became the bedrock of religious authority (Bosman, 2020). In doing so, Protestantism entrenched a cognitive commitment to textuality: knowledge must reside in a bounded, written document. This shift was not merely theological; it was epistemological. A civilization of libraries and archives finds it natural to conceive of a "world order" of knowledge, where each node (university) can be assessed by how much textual production and citation it generates (Ziegler, 2022).

Secondly, European modernity is marked by the rise of measurement as the royal road to knowledge. From the Scientific Revolution onward, Western epistemology increasingly equated knowing with counting or quantifying. The economic ethic that Max Weber famously analyzed in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* was not merely a work ethic—it was a mode of self-measurement (Weber, 1905). Numbers—whether in ledgers, sermons, or rankings—became the language of divine favor and moral worth. By the 20th century, the habit of measurement extended into education: standardized tests, IQ scores, university metrics – all reflect what Porter calls the "pursuit of objectivity in science and public life" through numbers (Porter, 1995). The ranking of universities is a direct heir of this mindset. The epistemological trust in numbers developed in Europe created fertile ground for rank ordering everything, from nations (by GDP or military strength) to, eventually, universities by composite scores.

Thirdly, Europe pioneered the institutionalization of knowledge on a scale and manner that later became the global norm. Medieval Europe produced the university as a distinct institution (starting with Bologna, Paris, Oxford around the 12th–13th centuries) – essentially guilds of masters and students with charters to grant degrees. Over centuries, these universities became the arbiters of advanced knowledge, standardized curricula, and credentials. The idea that knowledge production and dissemination should be formally organized (with defined roles like professor, student, degrees like B.A., M.A., M.Sc., Ph.D., etc.) was a European export to the world (Yakunina, 2023). By the 19th century, the Humboldtian model (after Wilhelm von Humboldt's reforms in Prussia) integrated research and teaching in the modern research university – a model quickly emulated across Europe and North America, and eventually worldwide (Ash, 2006; Bongaerts, 2022). The institutional convergence under Western hegemony set the stage for a single ranking scale: only when universities from Boston to Bengaluru all claim the name "university" and

share certain features (libraries, laboratories, professors with Ph.D.s, publications, etc.) does ranking across the globe seem meaningful.

We should note that these developments – textualization, quantification, institutionalization – were not neutral progressions but tied to European cultural values. European Christianity's focus on scripture, for example, elevated textual authority; the Enlightenment's idolization of Reason promoted measurement as truth; the bureaucratic nation-state favored standardized institutions for control and progress. Each thread reinforced the others. By the late 19th and early 20th century, Europeans (and Americans) were ranking virtually everything: books by popularity, students by grades, even races and cultures on an imagined civilizational scale.

Contrast this with other knowledge traditions. In India, for example, pre-colonial education took very different forms: guru-shishya parampara (master-disciple lineages), community-led schools (pathshalas), and oral transmission were common. Knowledge was often valued in a contextual and relational sense – the reputation of a teacher, the spiritual development of the student, the applicability of knowledge to one's duties – rather than abstract output metrics (Rajguru, 2024). There was no concept of a universal ranking of Nalanda versus Taxila versus Vikramshila universities in ancient times (Mahesh et al., 2023); each had its own renown, but it wasn't distilled into a single hierarchy (For the sake of convenience, we shall continue referring to these Indian centres of knowledge as "universities," though this raises important questions: Can we legitimately call them that? Does such a label not risk mapping them onto a Western topos, importing with it assumptions about structure, curriculum, and institutional form that are foreign to these traditions?). Indeed, the very notion that one could rank a place of learning hundreds of miles away against another would have been odd – knowledge was revered, but not reduced to a trophy to be won by "the #1 university." Similarly, in China, there wasn't a practice of ranking the academies or knowledge institutions in a global field (Marginson, 2011). The Western idea of unitary hierarchy – a single ordered list from best to worst – was not a feature of many non-European cultures' approach to knowledge, which were often more networked or localized in how they valued learning.

All this is to say that the epistemological foundations for global rankings are deeply European. The conviction that text-derived, measurable outputs from formally similar institutions can be objectively compared is a product of Europe's intellectual evolution. This isn't to cast Europe as somehow uniquely number-obsessed in a pejorative sense. What we now treat as common sense – that a university can be measured by counting its library size, faculty qualifications, research citations, student-staff ratios, etc., and then judged superior or inferior to another – is actually a reflection of one cultural trajectory becoming global common sense. By recognizing this lineage, we set the stage for questioning the universality of rankings. If rankings appear natural, it is because the world has been largely remade in the image of the West through

colonization and globalization. The next section examines a telling historical episode of this process: the British encounter with indigenous Indian education. It shows how Europeans, armed with their own categories of knowledge, often failed to perceive the reality of Indian learning – seeing only what their framework allowed them to see. This misperception, we will argue, is analogous to how global ranking metrics today fail to "see" forms of excellence outside the Western paradigm.

Colonial Encounters and Cognitive Misunderstandings: The British View of Indian Education

When the British began administering India in the 18th and 19th centuries, they brought with them a firm conviction about what a proper education system looked like – a conviction shaped by their own cultural experience. Schools had classrooms, curricula, and exams; higher learning occurred in formal colleges or under recognized scholars; knowledge was codified in texts and disseminated through institutions. It was through these lenses that British officers and thinkers tried to understand the vast and ancient landscape of Indian education. The result was a profound cognitive misunderstanding. The British recognized only the most visible and familiar elements – such as the gurukul model (a learned guru teaching a handful of students with a text in an ashram) – and failed to grasp the wider, more complex reality of education in India. This misunderstanding had lasting consequences: it led to colonial policies that disrupted indigenous systems and imposed European models, all the while imagining that India had little to no education to begin with (Misra & Keerthiraj, 2025).

It comes as a surprise to many today (including many Indians) that on the eve of British rule, India had a widespread network of schools and institutions of learning. Pioneering archival research by Dharampal (1983) unearthed extensive early British surveys and reports attesting to this fact. For example, British administrators in the 1820s conducted surveys in various provinces – Madras, Bombay, Bengal, Punjab – to catalog indigenous schools. These surveys, now preserved in colonial archives and brought to light by Dharampal, revealed thousands of schools funded and run by local communities. One British official, G.L. Prendergast, observed in 1821: "there is hardly a village, great or small, throughout our territories, in which there is not at least one school... where young natives are taught reading, writing and arithmetic, upon a system so economical... and so simple and effectual, that there is hardly a cultivator or petty dealer who is not competent to keep his own accounts with a degree of accuracy beyond what we meet with amongst the lower orders in our own country." (Dharampal, 1983). This testimony is striking: a colonial officer admits that virtually every Indian village had a school, and that even peasants in

India possessed practical literacy and numeracy often superior to their counterparts in England (Dharampal, 1983).

The indigenous schools were diverse in form. There were pathshalas (teaching in local vernaculars, often focusing on literacy and arithmetic for boys of various castes), madrassas (for instruction in Persian/Arabic and Islamic learning), tols or chatuspathis (teaching Sanskrit literature and sciences in Bengal and elsewhere), and yes, the gurukulas (more traditional Vedic residential schools largely for priestly education). Education was funded by community resources – a small grain tax, local endowments, or patronage by guilds and local elites. This enrollment level was comparable to, if not higher than, schooling rates in England at the time. Moreover, the social composition of students was broad. Contrary to the British assumption that only Brahmins or upper castes learned to read, the surveys found that a majority of students in many regions were from non-elite castes (the Shudra castes often constituted the majority of pupils), and there were even some students from communities the British labeled "untouchable." Teachers too came from various communities. In other words, late pre-colonial India had a decentralized, community-based education system that was more inclusive and widespread than the British had imagined (Dharampal, 1983).

How, then, did the British "cognitively misunderstand" this reality? Part of the answer lies in their conceptual blinders. When early colonial observers looked for "education" in India, they sought the familiar signifiers of their education system: formal schools with a fixed syllabus, education controlled by a central authority (church or state), instruction in classical high-status languages (like Latin, or in India's case, Sanskrit or Arabic) and so forth. They found some of these in the gurukul or madarasa traditions, which resembled ecclesiastical schooling or monastic tuition. But they overlooked or undervalued the village schools teaching in Tulu, Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, Marathi, etc., to children of farmers and merchants, perhaps because these did not fit the British preconception of a "proper" education (some colonial writings dismissed vernacular schools as mere apprenticeships or trivial rudiments). The British were, in a sense, looking for Oxford and Cambridge in the subcontinent and, not finding them, concluded that India had no education to speak of (Kambala & Mathe, 2023; Ghosh, 2020).

No one epitomizes this attitude better than Thomas Babington Macaulay. As a member of the Governor-General's Council, Macaulay authored the infamous Minute on Education (1835) that set the course for English-language education in India. Macaulay, by his own admission, knew nothing of Sanskrit or Arabic, yet he felt confident enough to declare that all of Indian and Arab literature was inferior to European learning. In his Minute he wrote: "I have never found one among [the Orientalists] who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia."(Macaulay, 1835). He went on to

assert that in subjects of philosophy or science, "the superiority of the Europeans becomes absolutely immeasurable" (Macaulay, 1835), and thus English must be the medium and content of higher education in India. Macaulay's arrogant pronouncement was not just personal prejudice; it reflected a broader colonial mindset that equated "true knowledge" with Western, text-based, institutionalized knowledge. The rich tapestries of Indian oral traditions, local histories, indigenous sciences, and technical skills were invisible to Macaulay's gaze – they were not knowledge in the sense he understood. When he argued that educating Indians in English literature and science was the only worthwhile path, he was effectively dismissing countless indigenous schools and scholarly traditions as null and void.

This cognitive failure had very real effects. The British, acting on their belief that India lacked education, set about creating anglicized institutions – universities in Calcutta, Bombay, Madras (established 1857) modeled on London University (Prasad, 2020); English-medium schools proliferating in cities to create a class of clerks and professionals loyal to the Raj; and later, an entire colonial education bureaucracy geared toward Western curricula and exams. At the same time, indigenous schools were left to wither. As British rule expanded, traditional schools lost patronage – village funds were reallocated to new purposes, land endowments to pathshalas were taxed or disrupted, and the prestige of local learning fell relative to the new English education that promised government jobs (Kambala & Mathe, 2023). Gandhi famously lamented in 1931 that "the beautiful tree of Indian education was cut down by you British", as he told British officials, "because it was not cared for; the British assumed it was worthless and let it perish" (Gandhi, 1931). Dharampal's title The Beautiful Tree echoes this metaphor – a once-flourishing system uprooted under colonial policy.

Notably, even when confronted with evidence of widespread indigenous education, some British officials could not digest it. After William Adam surveyed Bengal's schools in the 1830s and reported large numbers of teaching institutions, there was hesitation and dispute about the findings – perhaps it was unfathomable that a "backward" colony had so many schools (Adam, 1835–1838). The British ultimately proceeded on the assumption that real education had to be created anew (through English schooling) rather than nurtured (or reformed) from the existing Indian institutions. This mindset illustrates a broader phenomenon: Europe's categories of knowledge were imposed as the universal yardsticks, and anything that didn't fit was dismissed or reinterpreted to fit (Midgley, 2020; Tah, 2021). The British recognized the gurukul (since it vaguely resembled a classical grammar school or seminary) and thus enshrined an image of India's traditional education as a few sages teaching high-caste boys under banyan trees – a romantic but narrow picture. They failed to recognize the network of practical vernacular schools producing literate

farmers, traders, and craftsmen, because such schools did not count as "scholarly" by their criteria.

Ranking as a Cognitive Category: A Culturally Rooted Way of Knowing

What do we mean by calling "ranking" a cognitive category? In essence, we are suggesting that the practice of ranking – of creating ordered hierarchies based on comparative evaluation – is not just a neutral technique, but a way of thinking deeply embedded in a particular cultural mindset. A cognitive category is a fundamental concept or schema through which a culture perceives and organizes reality. Ranking is a concept that seems obvious to those of us educated in Western or Western-modeled systems – of course one can rank universities, or rank students, or rank anything by some criteria. But this "of course" masks a culturally specific ontology: it assumes that entities (like universities) are comparable in terms of more or less of some value (like excellence), and that this value can be quantified and ordered.

Let us unpack the cultural assumptions behind the ranking category:

- Comparability and commensurability: Ranking presumes that very disparate entities can be placed on a single scale. Harvard, a 400-year-old wealthy private university in the U.S., can be meaningfully compared with, say, the University of Nairobi or Jawaharlal Nehru University in India, on a unified ladder of excellence. This is a profoundly Western belief, tied to the idea of universal knowledge and universal standards. Other civilizations did not necessarily operate with this belief. An Indian guru might have compared two disciples or two texts to say which has more merit for a particular purpose, but would he have conceived of ranking all gurukuls in the country from best to worst? Unlikely, because there wasn't an assumption of a single scale of value – each had its own strengths or purpose.
- Quantifiable hierarchy: Ranking reduces quality to quantity. It reflects a cultural attraction to hierarchy expressed in numbers. European thought has long been comfortable with hierarchies – the "Great Chain of Being" ranked all living things and spiritual entities in a ladder from God down to the lowest creature (Lovejoy, 1936). Colonial racial science notoriously attempted to rank races and cultures on an evolutionary scale (Gould, 1996; Said, 1978). The idea that one university is higher than another because it produces more research or has better faculty-student ratios is a productivity hierarchy that fits industrial-era Western thinking, not traditional Indian thinking.
- Priority of measurability: The ranking category privileges what can be measured and counted. This is not a universal prioritization. Indigenous knowl-

edge systems often valued qualities that are intangible – the wisdom of a teacher, the character built in a student, the harmony of a community – none of which can be easily tallied. The modern ranking mentality, however, is uncomfortable with what it cannot count (Porter, 1995; Ravetz, 1997). It either ignores it or devises a proxy number for it. In doing so, it transforms the concept of quality into something countable, which is a significant cognitive shift. For example, the idea of "excellence" in education becomes tied to metrics like citation counts or teacher-student ratios, as if excellence is inherent in those figures. This reflects a form of metric-fetishism ingrained in the ranking category.

- Universalism and competition: Ranking as a cognitive category also ties into a competitive worldview – that entities are in a race for being "number one." This resonates with the capitalist and Social Darwinist ethos that emerged from the West: the notion that competition drives improvement and that having winners and losers is natural. The ranking mindset imposes a competitive universal field: all are competing in the same Olympics of academia (Foucault, 1977; Graham, 2005). Non-Western traditions typically lacked such a global competitive frame for knowledge. Scholars in medieval India, for instance, would debate and have contests of logic or poetry, but these were localized and specific – there was no scoreboard ranking all pandits across India. The competitive ranking of knowledge producers is a cognitive script that the West has written and sold to the rest.

Recent critical scholarship is beginning to interrogate this category. Shahjahan, Blanco and Andreotti (2017), for instance, provide a decolonial reading of global university rankings. They argue that rankings are embedded in a "broader dominant imaginary of higher education" which circumscribes what is deemed possible and desirable (Shahjahan et al., 2017). In other words, the idea of ranking is part of an "onto-epistemic" structure – a way of being and knowing – specific to modern institutions. Their work suggests that to truly reimagine higher education beyond rankings, one must question the very imaginary that sustains it. This is a challenging task, because it requires us to imagine the unimaginable: a world where universities are not lined up and numbered, but perhaps seen in pluralistic terms of distinct purposes and strengths.

By framing ranking as a cognitive category, we prepare to analyze the global ranking systems not as neutral evaluative tools, but as instruments carrying a cultural logic. In the next section, we turn to the concrete systems of global university ranking – QS, Times Higher Education (THE), and the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) – to see how they embed the Western epistemic values discussed, and how they universalize that cognitive category by their worldwide

influence. We will show that these rankings, far from being merely descriptive, actively shape the behavior of universities and even governments, reinforcing the dominance of the cultural model they sprang from.

The Global Ranking Systems: QS, THE, ARWU and the Reinforcement of Western Norms

In 2003, a Chinese university (Shanghai Jiao Tong) published the first Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) – initially an attempt to benchmark Chinese universities against the world's best. A year later, Times Higher Education(THE) magazine in the UK, in partnership with Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), released a global ranking. QS later split off to produce its own annual QS World University Rankings. In less than two decades, these rankings have become hugely influential. They are cited by students choosing where to study, by universities crafting strategic plans, and even by governments shaping higher education policy. What do these systems measure, and whose values do those measurements reflect?

All global rankings claim to measure "university quality" or "excellence," but each uses a specific set of indicators – and these indicators reveal a great deal about the underlying value system:

- QS World University Rankings: Until a recent update, the QS methodology (as of mid-2010s) weighted 6 indicators: Academic Reputation (40% of the score, based on a global survey of academics), Employer Reputation(10%, based on employer surveys), Faculty-Student Ratio (20%), Citations per Faculty (20%), International Faculty Ratio (5%), and International Student Ratio (5%) (QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2015). The heavy reliance on reputational surveys (50% combined) means that long-established and well-known institutions (mostly in the West) have a built-in advantage – reputation often tracks historical prestige. The citations per faculty metric rewards research output and impact in academic journals (mostly those indexed in English-language databases like Scopus & Web of Science). Internationalization metrics (faculty/student) reward universities that attract global talent, implicitly favoring countries that use English or are seen as desirable destinations. In short, QS's criteria reflect a research-intensive, internationally networked model of a university, in line with Anglo-American ideals. Even QS's attempt to be fair reveals biases: an "Anglo-Saxon bias" is acknowledged, since English-language publishing dominates the citation databases and Anglo-American academics have a higher culture of self-citation and cross-citation (Melosik, 2023). QS officials defend their ranking by saying they've tried to mitigate this – e.g. conducting surveys in multiple languages – but they

concede "some bias remains in the citation per faculty count" due to English dominance. The very need for such mitigation highlights that the default criteria are tailored to Western academic practices (Tennant, 2020).

- Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings: THE uses 5 broad categories (with multiple sub-metrics): Teaching (learning environment) ~30%, Research (volume, income, reputation) ~30%, Citations (research influence) ~30%, International outlook (staff, students, research) ~7.5%, and Industry income (knowledge transfer)~2.5% (Times Higher Education, 2016) . THE places a stronger emphasis on research citation impact (which can dramatically boost or sink a university's score) and also on a reputational survey for teaching and research. The pattern is similar: research prowess (especially in sciences) is king, reputation (which correlates with age and global visibility) is vital, and international profile is a mark of quality. Teaching is ostensibly considered (via student-staff ratios, PhD awards per staff, etc.), but critics note that these are proxies at best (Kaidesoja, 2022; Bellantuono et al., 2022). The message of THE's metrics is that a great university is one that produces a lot of cited research, has global name recognition, and operates at scale with significant resources (wealthy universities score high on income and can afford lower student-staff ratios). Again, this model mirrors the elite Western research university (Harvard, Oxford, etc.), and virtually requires universities worldwide to emulate that model if they want to score well.
- Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU, Shanghai Rankings): ARWU was the pioneer and has a very research-weighted formula. Its criteria include Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals won by alumni and faculty, highly cited researchers on staff, articles published in Nature and Science, articles indexed in major citation indices, and a per capita performance based on the above (Safón & Docampo, 2020). ARWU doesn't use surveys or teaching measures at all – it's purely focused on research output and prestige. Notably, it doesn't adjust for institution size (initially), so large institutions with many faculty had an advantage (as ARWU itself noted, favoring "large, well funded institutions with an emphasis on science"). Under ARWU, the top 20 has consistently been dominated by American and British universities (with a few others like Stanford, MIT, etc.) that have long research legacies, Nobel laureates, and massive publication volume (Docampo et al., 2022). ARWU's influence, though less publicized in the media (it's less student-focused than QS/THE), is huge among policymakers because of its clear, seemingly hard-science criteria. It essentially tells governments: if you want a "world-class" university, invest in big science – hunt for Nobels, pour money into research that yields publications in top journals, hire star scientists. It's a recipe drawn from the history of Western research powerhouses.

Across these systems, certain epistemological values repeat: an emphasis on written, codified knowledge production (papers, citations); an emphasis on measurable indicators of input or output (faculty numbers, funding, awards); and an assumption that one size fits all in what constitutes a top university (namely, being like the Euro-American prototypes). These values echo the European foundations we discussed. The text-based value: papers in prestigious journals (mostly Western journals) are taken as proxies for quality. The measurability: everything from reputation to teaching quality is forced into a metric – even student satisfaction or international "outlook" are turned into numbers. The institutionalization: only formal academic output counts, not, say, informal community impact or local language scholarship that isn't indexed globally.

These rankings reshape institutional behavior in a competitive, almost game-theoretic way. Universities start gaming the metrics, which reinforces the metrics' hold. For instance, since QS and THE count international faculty, universities (especially in Asia and the Middle East) have actively recruited foreign professors or adjunct international faculty, sometimes nominally, just to boost those numbers. In one notorious trend, a 2023 report highlighted that dozens of the world's most highly cited researchers had switched their primary affiliations to Saudi institutions in exchange for cash, with little obligation to work, purely to boost those institutions' ranking profile (Catanzaro, 2023). This kind of gaming is a direct response to what the rankings reward (in this case, highly cited researchers count heavily in the global indices). In another case, a few universities achieved remarkably high citation scores by coordinating massive self-citation or intra-network citation of each other's work, a practice dubbed "industrialised self-citation" (Gadd, 2021). THE had to adjust its metrics when this came to light. But again, the only reason such citation cartels emerged is because the ranking provided a numeric target that could be gamed. The cognitive category of ranking turns the pursuit of knowledge into a scoreboard, and players then strategize to score points rather than genuinely improve scholarship.

At a systemic level, countries that traditionally fared poorly in global rankings are responding either by trying to play the same game or by questioning the game. China, for example, poured billions into its C9 league universities and others through projects like "985" and "211" in the 2000s, explicitly to produce Nobel-level research and climb ARWU (which they did – now several Chinese universities are in the top 100 globally) (Shen et al., 2023). Russia launched Project 5-100 in 2012 aiming to get 5 universities into the top 100; though partially successful, it also led to heavy investments in English publications and international hires (Berestov et al., 2020). Smaller countries sometimes feel left out: in the Arab world, seeing few of their universities ranked, wealthy Gulf states started new universities or lavished funds to quickly gain points (As mentioned above). There's even a last resort some adopt: create alternative rankings that favor them. ARWU itself began partly because of this,

they made their own metric (which ironically still favored Western research-oriented criteria). India developed the NIRF (National Institutional Ranking Framework) for domestic comparison and toyed with a BRICS university ranking collaboration – tacit admissions that the global rankings were skewed against their context (Singh, 2021). But these alternatives often mimic the global criteria with slight tweaks; they don't escape the cognitive category of ranking, they just adjust it.

The Indian Response: Metrics, Publications, and the Race to the Top

When global university rankings first began to gain traction in the 2000s, Indian universities found themselves lagging embarrassingly far down the lists. India, a country of over 1.4 billion people with one of the largest university systems in the world, often did not have a single institution in the top 200 or even top 300 of the big rankings. This sparked national hand-wringing: Why do Indian universities perform so poorly? Explanations ranged from inadequate funding, bureaucratic governance, lack of research culture, to brain drain of top talent etc. While those factors have merit, what concerns us here is how Indian academia reacted to the rankings. Broadly speaking, the reaction has been to adapt to the metrics – sometimes zealously, sometimes superficially, and sometimes cynically. This adaptation has driven a surge in metric-driven behavior: a focus on quantity of publications (often at the expense of quality), the emergence of dubious journals and conferences, and various tactics to boost numbers rather than substance. It has also engendered policy changes and initiatives directly tied to ranking criteria.

One of the immediate responses was an intense push to increase research output, especially in journals indexed by Scopus or Web of Science (since those feed into citation counts for QS, THE, etc.). The logic was simple: we're low in rankings because we don't publish enough; therefore, let's publish more. Indian universities and regulatory bodies implemented policies to incentivize publication. The University Grants Commission (UGC) – India's higher education regulator – made it mandatory for PhD scholars to publish at least two research papers in refereed journals before they can earn their degree (Recently they changed the policy) (Patwardhan & Nagarkar, 2021). For faculty promotions, the UGC introduced an API (Academic Performance Indicator) system that assigns points to various activities, with substantial weight given to research publications. As a result, faculty across India – even in primarily teaching-oriented colleges – were pushed to publish constantly. The quantity of Indian research papers skyrocketed. By some measures, India now ranks among the top 3 or 4 countries globally in number of scientific publications per year (Jha, 2023). At first glance, this looks like a success story – India is becoming a research powerhouse. However, a closer look reveals a quality issue. Despite high output,

citations and impact remain low. India produces a lot of papers, but many of them garner few citations and have minimal impact on global scholarship. According to data from 2023, India was 4th in research output but only 9th in citations (Jha, 2023). The Financial Express bluntly stated, "India ranks fourth in research output but ninth when it comes to research citation, raising concern over the quality of work produced" (Jha, 2023). In other words, the metric-driven culture created an illusion of productivity. Indian academia learned how to play the game of "publish or perish," but not necessarily how to produce high-quality, meaningful research (Kharumnuid & Deo, 2022). This is a classic case of Goodhart's Law: when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure. The number of papers became a target, and thus its correlation with actual scholarly contribution weakened (Goodhart, 1975).

One analysis revealed a startling figure: 27% of the world's predatory journal publishers were based in India, and about 35% of the authors in predatory journals were from Indian institutions (Jayaraman, 2018). This indicates that both the supply and demand for dubious publishing were high in India. A UGC-approved list of journals (supposed to guide faculty on where to publish) was found in 2017 to be filled with suspect outlets; a detailed scrutiny showed that over 88%of the journals (in one subset of that list) were "low quality" or potentially predatory Jayaraman, 2018). It took exposés in Nature and Indian media to spur the UGC to clean up the list (Raju, 2020). This episode illustrates a vicious cycle: the ranking-inspired obsession with metrics led to shortcuts – pay-to-publish journals mushroomed, which then undermined the integrity of research. Indian scholars, especially younger ones desperate for a promotion or a degree, were lured into publishing in these fake journals, sometimes even encouraged by senior colleagues. The net effect was a glut of "paper mill" research that neither advanced knowledge nor improved India's reputation (indeed, it harmed it).

Another phenomenon in India has been the rise of conference mills and citation cartels. There has been an explosion of conferences (often sponsored by dubious organizations) that promise publication of papers in proceedings or journals. Academics attend these en masse to pad their CVs, often with very marginal work. It would be naive to think no Indian institutions partook in such tactics, given the enormous pressure to show improvement. In fact, a recent coverage by The Hindu (Swaminathan, 2024) argued that the metrics-focused system has created a mindset that education is a market, not a public good – implying that universities and academics are behaving like competitors in a marketplace, using any means to get ahead. The article suggested that hyper-focus on rankings and metrics is distorting academic values in India.

On the policy side, the Indian government in the mid-2010s took a keen interest in seeing Indian universities ascend the rankings. Apart from the Institutions of Eminence (IoE) scheme which granted autonomy and extra funds to a select few

universities (public and private) deemed capable of becoming "world-class," there were other reforms: increased funding for research through schemes like IMPRESS and STRIDE (for social sciences) and the establishment of new research universities or science institutes (Anchal & Saimon, 2024). However, these efforts often explicitly cited global rankings as a motivation. The national discourse became one of catching up: "How many Indian universities can we get in the top 100 by 2025?" etc. While setting such goals can mobilize resources, it also narrowed the definition of success to the terms set by QS/THE/ARWU. For example, funding bodies began to stress publication in high-impact journals, filing of patents, and international collaborations – all things that score well on global metrics. There was less talk of, say, improving undergraduate teaching quality in rural colleges, because that doesn't register in rankings (Nassa et al., 2021).

Another response by Indian institutions, particularly the premier ones like the IITs (Indian Institutes of Technology) and IISc (Indian Institute of Science), has been at times to question the rankings – but only the methodology, not the concept. Notably, in 2020, several older IITs announced a boycott of the THE World Rankings, citing "lack of transparency" and "faulty methodology" (Agrawal, 2024). They complained that the data used by THE was not adequately verified and that the methodology penalized them unfairly (for instance, IITs have a smaller faculty size relative to students due to funding constraints, hurting their teaching score). However, the IITs did not boycott the idea of being ranked; in fact, they continued to participate in QS rankings and even in the QS "By Subject" rankings where some IITs shine in engineering/technology categories (Gupta & Sawhney, 2023; Sharma et al., 2024). Rather than rejecting the ranking paradigm, they attempted to nudge it in their favor or withdraw from the one that made them look bad while embracing the one that was slightly more favorable. It's a kind of critique that still accepts the cognitive category of ranking – akin to saying "we want a fair race" rather than asking "why are we racing in the first place, and is racing the right metaphor for education?"

In summary, the Indian university system's engagement with global rankings has been a double-edged sword. On one side, it did spur some positive changes – more emphasis on research, funding for high-end projects, and international collaborations. On the other side, it created perverse incentives: valuing quantity over quality, fostering a cottage industry of fake journals and conferences, and diverting attention from local relevance. Academics in India now frequently talk in the language of metrics – H-index, impact factor, NAAC scores, NIRF ranks – sometimes more than the language of ideas and intellectual contribution. The paradox of indigenous knowledge discourse within colonial frameworks is stark here. Even as India champions the idea of reviving its ancient knowledge systems (for instance, setting up departments for yoga, Ayurveda, Sanskrit studies, and so on), it is doing

so largely within the Western university format and often to meet global validation (Keerthiraj et al., 2025).

Indigenous Knowledge in a Colonial Cage: The Paradox of Discourse

Amidst the race to climb global rankings, there is also a growing chorus in countries like India for recognizing indigenous knowledge systems and decolonizing the curriculum. On the surface, this seems like a counter-current: a desire to break free from Western epistemology and value native traditions of knowledge. However, in effect, they attempt to validate or reinterpret indigenous knowledge through the lens of European categories. This raises a provocative question: Can one truly recover or empower indigenous ways of knowing while accepting the evaluative frameworks of a foreign culture? If not, then these efforts may be reinforcing the very cognitive domination they seek to undo.

Consider the example of Sanskrit and traditional Indian knowledge studies. In recent years, Indian universities (sometimes prodded by government initiatives) have launched programs on "Indian Knowledge Systems" – covering topics like ancient mathematics, Vedic literature, traditional arts, Ayurveda (Indian medicine), etc (Khan & Sharma, 2024). The intention is to bring these into mainstream academia and give them respect. Yet, how are these programs structured? Typically, they are structured like any Western academic department: they have courses, credits, research publications, and they measure success by publications and citations in journals often created anew to have an "international journal of Ayurveda" or such, which ironically seek indexing in Scopus to gain legitimacy! (Venkatraman, 2024). A scholar of the Vedas might, for instance, apply German philological methods or French post-structural theory to interpret Indian texts. While there is nothing inherently wrong with cross-pollination of methods, the point is that the terms of validation remain Eurocentric. This is not a new phenomenon. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, Indian thinkers often engaged with their tradition via European lenses. Vivekananda reinterpreted Hindu philosophy almost as a form of American Transcendentalism to appeal to Western audiences; reformers in the early 1900s tried to prove that ancient Indian medicine was compatible with modern science (Medhananda, 2022); even the nationalist historian K.M. Munshi, when founding the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan (an institute for Indian culture), used the structure of a Western academy to promote Indian culture. Indians have come to accept that a "world-class university" is one that meets the criteria set by a particular global (Western) standard, and thus even their attempts to promote something uniquely Indian are channeled through that mould.

This is reminiscent of what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, the Kenyan writer, called the "colonization of the mind." (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986) We may have political freedom, but the categories we think in are often those of the colonizer. When Indian academics debate how to improve their university's ranking, they rarely question whether the ranking system recognizes the full scope of what their university does. Instead, they discuss how to change the university to meet the ranking criteria – hire more faculty with foreign degrees, push for more papers in Nature, collaborate with Ivy League institutions, etc. It's a form of intellectual subalternity, where one accepts another's standard as the measure of one's worth. Even the discourse on decolonizing education often happens through Western theoretical frames (e.g., invoking Foucault, Derrida, or postcolonial theory that emerged from Western universities) (Barlas, 2023). The irony is thick: scholars use Euro-American critical theory vocabulary to articulate how to free themselves from Euro-American dominance.

In Indian universities, courses on indigenous subjects often reference Western authors to gain legitimacy. A course on ancient Indian political thought might rely on interpretations by Western Indologists or use comparative politics frameworks that treat Kautilya's Arthashastra as a precursor to Machiavelli (Akolkar et al., 2024). The intention might be to show the world "Look, we had great ideas too," but the method is to fit those ideas into a narrative the world (i.e., the West) finds recognizable and impressive. The risk is that one ends up affirming the superiority of the Western gaze: our knowledge is valuable because it can be understood and appreciated by your standards. This is not to say that Western frameworks are "bad" or that one should shun them entirely. The point is about cognitive independence. Until one can critique and deploy categories on one's own terms, one is not fully free intellectually. With respect to global rankings, genuine independence would mean: either developing alternative evaluation systems that reflect our own educational values, or at least stripping the rankings of their aura of inevitability and treating them as one limited perspective among many (Ojha & Venkateswaran, 2022).

Having explored this paradox, we can better understand why non-European cultures often fail to fully comprehend or critique ranking systems. It is not due to lack of intelligence or insight; it is because the conceptual tools to do so lie outside their historical experience, and entering the modern knowledge game usually meant adopting foreign tools. In the next section, we will delve more into this issue: Why do cultures like India find it so difficult to question ranking at its root? We will argue that it's precisely because rankings are culturally alien – not in the sense that people can't use them, but in the sense that the deep assumptions behind them don't resonate with indigenous concepts of knowledge and value. Understanding this will help clarify that the problem is not ignorance but a misfit of categories. And that realization, in turn, can open the door to alternative ways of evaluating excellence that are more aligned with our own civilizational context.

Cultural Blind Spots: Why Non-Western Cultures Struggle to Critique Rankings

If global rankings are a Western cultural product, one might expect that non-Western societies would be quick to challenge them or propose alternatives that fit their own worldviews. Yet, as we have seen, the dominant reaction outside the West has been compliance or mild protest, not radical critique. When criticisms arise, they tend to focus on fairness or bias (e.g., "Rankings favor rich English-speaking universities") rather than questioning whether the entire notion of ranking educational institutions is appropriate. In the absence of a home-grown critique, they tacitly accept the alien framework as given. Let's break down this idea. Non-Western cultures did not historically practice ranking in the modern sense – as we discussed, they had different ways of acknowledging excellence (reputation within a community, spiritual authority, mastery of specific skills, etc.). When colonialism and globalization brought Western education systems into these cultures, they brought the ranking concept along slowly (through exams, merit lists, class ranks, etc., which are micro-level rankings). Over time, people got used to these practices (for example, Indians became very familiar with ranking students in exam results; the entire competitive exam culture is now deeply ingrained). So at a practical level, ranking is no longer unfamiliar. But at a conceptual level, the deep rationale for ranking has not been digested because it was never generated from within (McKenna, 2024; Hamann & Ringel, 2023).

One can use something without fully understanding its underpinnings – like using a smartphone without knowing how it works internally. Non-Western academia has been using rankings without engaging with the philosophy of rankings. The philosophical critique would require asking uncomfortable questions: What is a university really for? Can its value be captured in numbers? Who decides what counts as quality? These questions verge into epistemology and cultural values. In Western intellectual tradition, such questions have been asked. For instance, debates about the purpose of a university go back at least to Newman's Idea of a University (Newman, 1852), and later works like Bill Readings' The University in Ruins (Readings, 1996) question the meaning of "excellence" as an empty term (Han & Wu, 2021). But these debates are not mainstream in countries like India – they remain confined to a few thinkers. The average academic or policymaker in India has not been exposed to or trained in critiquing the metrics of evaluation; rather, they are trained in achieving within given metrics (Dalal et al., 2021). It's a blind spot in our intellectual socialization.

One must also consider the internal class dynamics. In many non-Western countries, the academic and policy leadership is itself a Westernized class (in terms of education and orientation). They often genuinely believe in the values that rank-

ings embody, because they came through those values. Take the IITs and IIMs in India: they were established on Western models (with foreign assistance) and have a culture that prides itself on meeting international standars (Tumbe, 2020).. Their faculty often have PhDs from the West; their students aim for global careers. For them, to question global benchmarks feels like heresy; it threatens their self-identity as world-class players (Punjabi, 2022). It is telling that the loudest champions of "let's not care about Western rankings" in India are usually from second-tier institutions or from the humanities – voices that the elite might dismiss as sour grapes or anti-modern. Meanwhile, the top science/engineering institutions double down on chasing those benchmarks, because it validates their self-conception. This internal hierarchy – Westernized elite vs. more indigenous or marginal scholars – means there is not a united front in critiquing rankings. Those in power in academia in the Global South might like the idea of rankings when they think they can win (or at least when they individually can win, say by publishing in a top journal and boosting their CV, even if their university doesn't rank high).

It's important to clarify that saying non-Western cultures fail to critique rankings doesn't mean individuals from those cultures never critique – there are strong critical voices. But the critique doesn't gain collective traction or policy influence. One reason is the lack of a culturally resonant narrative against rankings. For example, a hypothetical narrative could be: "Our universities should serve our people and culture, not chase foreign approval through rankings." This narrative does exist among a fringe of educationists and maybe political thinkers in India, but it hasn't become mainstream. It is overshadowed by the narrative: "Our universities must become world-class and make India proud on the global stage." The latter aligns with national pride and aspiration, so it wins emotional resonance. No university wants to tell its students "We're not world-class by those standards, but that's okay because we have our own standards" – students might reply, "Nice, but I want a degree that's internationally recognized and a job in a multinational company." So there's also a pragmatic resignation: we have to play the game because everyone is playing it.

To draw an analogy: imagine a traditional musician forced into a Western music competition where points are given for hitting certain technical notes. The musician might feel this doesn't capture the soul of his music, but if he cannot change the format, he'll either try to adapt or complain that judges should also appreciate his style. He likely won't convince the organizers to overhaul the competition itself, especially if he's one voice among many contestants. Similarly, a few voices from the Global South might say "these rankings don't capture our value," but the organizers of global academia (prestigious journals, ranking agencies, etc.) carry on, and eventually the contestants find it easier to adjust themselves than to fight the system. However, recognizing this dynamic is the first step to changing it. If we

can collectively acknowledge that our failure to critique is not due to the rankings' truth but due to our own conceptual inertia, then we can start to empower new ways of thinking. In the final sections, we will explore what some of those alternative approaches might be and how to move towards epistemic pluralism – where multiple conceptions of excellence coexist, and global higher education is not governed by a single culturally-biased ranking logic. But before that, let's illustrate the consequences of the current ranking regime with some comparative data and examples, to hammer home what is at stake for different regions of the world and for different aspects of academic life.

Unequal Outcomes: Global North vs. South in the Ranking Era

Global university rankings have not only mirrored existing global inequalities; they have, in some ways, amplified and reinforced them. The distribution of ranked "top" universities is heavily skewed toward the wealthiest nations of the Global North – primarily the United States and Western Europe, with a few entries from East Asia and Oceania. Meanwhile, vast regions of the Global South (South Asia, Africa, Latin America) are sparsely represented at the top, if at all. This imbalance has material and intellectual consequences: it affects flows of talent and resources, and it shapes perceptions of where "good knowledge" is produced.

Let's consider some comparative snapshots. As of the mid-2020s, if one looks at the QS World University Rankings or THE Rankings, the top 20 or top 50 universities are dominated by the U.S. and U.K., along with a handful from countries like Switzerland (ETH Zurich), Singapore (NUS, NTU), and perhaps one or two from China (like Tsinghua or Peking sneaking into lower top 20 or top 30 in recent years). For instance, in the QS 2024 rankings, 7 of the top 10 were from the US/UK (MIT, Oxford, Harvard, Stanford, Cambridge, etc.), and none from South Asia, Africa, or Latin America. In fact, no Indian or African university has ever cracked the QS or THE top 100 in their overall world rankings to date. The first Indian entries typically appear around the 150s or 200s (IIT Bombay was #149 in QS 2024) (Kalita, 2023). In Africa institutions, such as the University of Cape Town, usually hover in the 200-300 range in recent years. Latin America's top performer, often the University of São Paulo, might be in the 200s or 150s depending on the ranking. Contrast this with the U.S., which routinely has dozens of universities in the top 100 and multiple in the top 20.

This disparity is not simply a neutral reflection of resources (though resources play a big role). Governments in developing countries sometimes concentrate resources into a few universities they hope can climb the ladder, at the expense of broader investment in higher education. For example, India's IoE scheme explicitly picks a few institutions for generous funding and autonomy (Nguyen et al., 2024).

While this might create one or two globally recognized institutions, it could widen internal disparities in the system, leaving the majority of universities (where most students study) under-resourced. In China's case, heavy investment in elite C9 universities certainly boosted their global standing, but it also means the gap between those and provincial universities remains vast (Hartley & Jarvis, 2021). Furthermore, global rankings often shape research priorities in the Global South in ways that may not align with local needs. Since rankings reward publication in international journals, universities in developing countries push faculty to research topics that international journals find interesting (often cutting-edge theoretical or globally generalized topics) rather than what might be locally vital but parochial. For instance, a university in Kenya might encourage its ecologists to publish on general biodiversity theory in high-impact journals rather than on, say, indigenous farming techniques for Kenyan climates which might only get published in a local journal with no indexing and no impact factor. This leads to a kind of intellectual homogenization: everyone chases the topics and styles of research that the "global market" (read: largely Western academic market) values, potentially under-investing in research for local problem-solving.

The inequity of outcomes is also apparent in fields of knowledge. Technologically oriented and English-dominant fields (like biomedical sciences, engineering, computer science) benefit much more from the ranking regime than fields tied to local culture (like vernacular literature, regional history, etc.). A university strong in Sanskrit studies or African indigenous history won't get much of a rankings boost because those works may not be cited globally. Over time, one fears a marginalization of these fields. We might see universities in the South divert resources from humanities to STEM because the latter yields more tangible returns in metrics and rankings. In India, indeed, engineering and management institutes get the lion's share of funding and public attention; humanities departments in state universities languish. Rankings aren't the sole cause, but they reinforce the narrative that "world class" equals science/technology output and global citation (Ishikawa, 2021; Kaur, 2023).

Let's quantify a bit to illustrate disparity: In the 2023 THE World Rankings, the United States alone had around 34 universities in the top 100, the United Kingdom about 7, and the rest were split among a handful of countries like Germany, Australia, China, Canada, etc. Meanwhile, not a single university from the entire continents of Africa or South America made the top 100. Asia's presence was mostly from East Asia (China, Singapore, Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong). South Asia's highest (IISc Bangalore) was in the 251-300 band (Agrawal, 2024). Even within the Global North vs. South binary, there are nuances: countries like China have rapidly risen by essentially beating the West at its own game (massive investment in research, sending scholars abroad for training, making English proficiency a must for faculty, etc.). This shows that with enough political will and money, the rankings game can

be conquered to an extent – but not every country can marshal those resources or has that system of governance (Ahlers & Christmann-Budian, 2023; Shen et al., 2023). It also raises questions: should everyone be trying to emulate that approach, or is it only viable for some authoritarian developmental states? What happens to countries that cannot pour billions into a few universities – do they just permanently accept being at the bottom of the knowledge hierarchy?

One particularly perverse effect of rankings in developing countries is on policy focus. Ministries and university leaders might focus on visible metrics rather than deeper systemic issues. For example, a government might proudly announce improved positions of a few universities in QS/THE, while the overall gross enrollment ratio in higher education remains low and many colleges have subpar teaching conditions. Rankings provide easy headlines like "X country now has 3 universities in top 200!" which can divert attention from the broader state of higher education that affects millions. Politicians and leaders like such headlines because they signify global recognition. However, the average student's experience in that country may not improve just because one or two institutions climbed the ladder. The quest to appear world-class might push universities to adopt better practices (improving lab facilities, encouraging publications, etc.). There is some truth in that – but the question is, at what cost and to what end? If the reforms are merely to improve rank, then a university could game its way into the top 200 without necessarily solving any local problems or providing better teaching to its undergraduates.

Recognizing these consequences is crucial because it underscores that rankings are not benign. They have political economy effects. They influence where students go, where research funding flows, which knowledge is prioritized. They act as instruments of what one author calls "cultural imperialism" in higher education (Shahjahan & Baizhanov, 2023) – subtly ensuring that the standards of the powerful become the standards of all. This sets the stage for our concluding discussion: If the current system is culturally contingent and unequal, what can be done? How do we move beyond a one-size-fits-all metric? How do we envision a world of academia that is more pluralistic and just? The concluding section will address these questions, arguing for an alternative imagination of excellence and calling for the courage to develop new evaluative frameworks rooted in diverse civilizational values.

The Cost to Academia: Hiring, Funding, Students, and the Commodification of Knowledge

Before we conclude with a call for alternatives, it's worth drilling down on how the dominance of ranking metrics has changed the internal dynamics of academia itself – in ways that affect faculty careers, research directions, student choices, and the very idea of knowledge as a public good. Essentially, the ranking race has accel-

erated the marketization of academia, treating education and research as competitive commodities. This section examines these changes.

In the age of rankings, universities increasingly hire and reward faculty based on metric profiles. A scholar's value is often gauged by the number of publications (especially in high-impact journals), total citations, h-index, and ability to attract grants – because these translate into ranking indicators. Qualities like teaching excellence, mentorship, or community engagement are harder to quantify and thus easier to overlook. For example, some universities have created positions for highly cited researchers with very light teaching loads – essentially leveraging the researcher's citation record for ranking points (Gadd, 2021). Saudi universities hiring foreign highly-cited scientists on contract is an extreme case (Catanzaro, 2023), but the logic permeates the system globally. In the U.S. and Europe too, faculty hiring committees place heavy emphasis on research metrics now, because they feel pressure to boost departmental rankings or assessments. This can alienate faculty who are brilliant educators or who focus on local-impact research. Younger academics get the message quickly: publish or perish (and preferably in English, in indexed outlets), otherwise your career stalls.

When a premium is placed on sheer number of publications, academics tend to slice their work into multiple small papers (salami slicing), or they rush to publish premature findings, or they might engage in ethically dubious practices(Xie & Ali, 2023).. We've already seen how this led to a bloom of low-quality journals and conferences. It also leads to citation circles where groups deliberately cite each other to raise their metrics. In terms of hiring, the system may disadvantage scholars in certain fields – e.g., a computer scientist or physicist might have an easier time getting a high h-index (since large collaborations yield many citations), whereas a scholar in classics or regional studies might never reach those numbers but could be extremely distinguished in their domain (Khurana & Sharma, 2021).. If both apply for a job at a university chasing rank, guess who has the edge? The risk is a homogenization of the faculty profile: everyone with the same kind of CV, reducing intellectual diversity. Rankings have a direct effect on what kind of research gets funded or prioritized. Applied research with local impact might get deprioritized if it doesn't also promise publications in global journals. For instance, a water management research center focusing on village irrigation might be seen as less prestigious (even if vitally needed) than a cutting-edge nanotechnology lab, because the latter is more likely to produce Nature papers or patents (Papazoglou et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2024).

Students, especially at the graduate and international level, use rankings as a decision tool. This has led to an interesting market-like behavior: top-ranked universities can attract the best students from around the world (who often also pay high tuition or bring grant money in), whereas lower-ranked ones struggle to fill

seats, especially in higher programs (Shreeve, 2020). This is particularly true for self-funded international students (a big revenue source). Countries like Australia and Canada, which market heavily to international students, rely on having at least a few universities in the upper tiers to entice those students. We now have a situation where a bright student from, say, India might choose a middling university in the U.S. simply because U.S. universities dominate the top 100, rather than consider a top Indian institution (even if in certain fields the Indian one might be fine) – simply due to the aura of rank and perceived value of the degree (Nguyen et al., 2024). Domestically, in countries like India, the NIRF (a national ranking) influences which colleges students apply to. Rankings thus shape student flows and, by extension, financing. But beyond choice, what about the student experience? As universities focus on the measurable outputs (research, citations, income), there is a concern that undergraduate teaching quality suffers. Teaching doesn't count much in global rankings except through crude proxies. One might cynically say: a professor will put more effort into a research paper (which boosts his career and the university's rank) than into preparing an excellent lecture (which, while noble, is invisible to the rankers).

The idea of pursuing knowledge for its own sake, or nurturing young minds to think critically as a societal good, is harder to quantify and thus gets sidelined by what can be counted: publications, citations, dollars, global awards. Bill Readings warned of the university becoming a "transnational bureaucratic corporation" where the guiding value is "excellence" – an empty signifier often measured in rankings and performance indicators (Readings, 1996). We see that happening. Universities brand themselves like companies (consider the slick advertising some do globally). Vice-chancellors/Presidents act like CEOs aiming to maximize metrics. Students become "customers" seeking a credential with maximum exchange value in the job market, rather than seekers of wisdom. Faculty become employees judged by KPIs (key performance indicators) akin to sales targets. This commodification is not solely caused by rankings – it's part of a broader neoliberal shift (and the cultural roots that led to neoliberal shift) in higher education (Santamaría, 2020). But rankings served as a key tool of neoliberal governance, as they enabled global competition and benchmarking (McKenna, 2024). They turned up the pressure on universities to behave in business-like ways to climb or maintain position. The language of "global competitiveness" in higher ed is pervasive now – it implicitly frames education as an industry and knowledge as a commodity to be produced and traded.

One might ask, who benefits from this commodification? Certainly, the ranking companies have made it into a profitable enterprise. QS and THE monetize their rankings via consultancies, data analytics services to universities, hosting summits, etc. (Chirikov, 2022). Highly ranked elite institutions benefit by justifying high tuition and attracting endowments. Employers arguably benefit by having a rough hierarchy

to streamline recruiting (Shahjahan et al., 2021). But does society at large benefit? The ranking-induced market culture in academia risks creating toxic, unhappy institutions with misplaced priorities. Scholars have noted that the behaviors encouraged by rankings "are not behaviours that lead to healthier institutions, but ones that lead to toxic, unhappy institutions with deeply misplaced loyalties" (Gadd, 2021).

All these costs underscore that the current paradigm is not neutral. It's actively shaping the evolution of higher education in ways we might later regret. Recognizing the depth of this impact strengthens the argument that we need to rethink and possibly redesign how we assess and guide higher education. If we agree that the value of universities is more than what rankings capture, we must seek other ways to recognize and reward that value.

CONCLUSION: BEYOND THE RANKING PARADIGM

Global university rankings present themselves as universal and objective, yet their criteria reflect one particular civilization's idea of what a "good" university is. The rest of the world has been compelled to either conform to these criteria or risk marginalization. This has led to distortions in academic practice, neglect of local needs, and the reinforcement of global inequalities. To move forward, we must first engage in cognitive honesty – an open acknowledgment of the situation as it is. We must honestly admit that global rankings do not measure some timeless Platonic form of excellence; they measure excellence as defined by a set of indicators that were chosen within a cultural and historical context. We must also be honest about the costs: the sacrifices in breadth of education, the unhealthy pressures on scholars etc. It is only with such honesty that we can foster meaningful discussions on reform.

Realistically, the existing rankings are not going to disappear overnight. But their influence can be moderated. Importantly, epistemic pluralism is not a call for rejecting standards or accountability. It's to recognize excellence in its many forms, and align assessments with the varied missions universities have. A local teacher-training college shouldn't be deemed a failure because it's not MIT; it should be evaluated on whether it's producing great school teachers for its region. A research university in a developing nation shouldn't be written off because its citation counts are lower than a rich university's; it could be doing groundbreaking work on endemic health issues that just don't get as many citations globally but save lives at home.

There should be a shift from viewing knowledge as a ladder to viewing it as a network or garden. In a ladder (ranking), someone is on top and someone at bottom. In a garden, different flowers bloom in different colors; the rose isn't "better" than the lotus, they're each splendid in their own way. Global academia could be more like a garden – a diverse ecosystem where each culture's knowledge traditions and

each institution's unique strengths contribute to the overall beauty and utility of human knowledge. Our call, then, is not to burn the ranking tables in effigy, but to outgrow them – to develop a richer action-knowledge and practice for evaluating academic excellence.

The task is undoubtedly challenging. Rankings are entrenched, and changing systems requires coalition and courage. But the stakes are high: the risk of a globally homogenized, inequitable academic world vs. the promise of a diverse, locally relevant, and collaborative one. By reclaiming the narrative of knowledge and insisting on cognitive honesty about our current tools, we take the first steps towards a more equitable intellectual future. When numbers replace knowledge, we all lose – the West and the Rest alike – because we reduce the richness and beauty of education to a narrow contest. A ranking, at best, captures one shadow of reality. It's time to turn on the light and see the full picture, in all its complex, beautiful, uncategorizable glory.

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Chapter 5
How Rankings Reinforce or Challenge Academic Colonialism

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ABSTRACT

This chapter challenges the conventional wisdom that equates university excellence with ranking position. In a landscape increasingly driven by numerical performance indicators, many institutions lose sight of their deeper mission and societal responsibilities. Instead of chasing metrics, this work argues for a broader definition of success—one rooted in intellectual freedom, community engagement, ethical leadership, and transformative education. Drawing on global case studies and reflective analysis, the chapter proposes a framework for universities to thrive authentically by aligning strategy with values. Excellence, it contends, is not a race to the top but a commitment to meaning, purpose, and enduring relevance.

INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, the pursuit of excellence in higher education has been increasingly shaped, and in many ways distorted, by the logic of global university rankings. Once tools for basic comparative reference, rankings have become symbolic hierarchies—spectacles of prestige, competition, and global academic capitalism. The numerical position of a university on a league table is now treated as a shorthand for quality, a determinant of funding, student choices, international collaborations, and even national policy direction (Bratti, 2022). It is not uncommon

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today for vice-chancellors to be judged not by the intrinsic value of their leadership or the societal relevance of their institutions, but by whether their university climbed five places in the latest ranking release.

This shift toward metric-centric evaluation represents a broader epistemological problem in higher education. It assumes that complex academic ecosystems, shaped by culture, history, local priorities, and pedagogical philosophy, can be reduced to a series of indicators—many of which are arbitrarily selected, unevenly weighted, and deeply biased in favor of established, wealthy institutions operating within a narrow model of research-intensive productivity. In such a world, universities in the Global South, those serving marginalized communities, or institutions pioneering bold educational experiments find themselves penalized or rendered invisible (Martin & Dandekar, 2022). Ironically, many of the universities celebrated at the top of these rankings owe their success not to the metrics used, but to centuries of privilege, state funding, and global hegemony.

The notion of "excellence," once a term rooted in intellectual rigor, civic engagement, and ethical commitment, has thus been hollowed out. It is now often synonymous with publication volume, citation counts, faculty-student ratios, and brand recognition. But can we really consider an institution excellent if it produces world-class research while neglecting its local community, overworks its faculty, commodifies its students, and sidelines disciplines that do not generate measurable "impact"? Can a university that excludes the poor, the rural, or the disabled, while maintaining gleaming infrastructure and international awards, be said to embody true excellence?

This chapter seeks to disrupt this dominant narrative. It argues that the current model of evaluating universities through narrow, decontextualized metrics not only misrepresents institutional value but also steers higher education away from its transformative potential. In place of rankings, it proposes an alternative vision—one that honors diversity of mission, encourages ethical reflexivity, and places learning, service, and social relevance at the heart of institutional evaluation. By redefining excellence, universities can reclaim their agency and imagine futures where they are not judged by how well they perform on someone else's scoreboard, but by how meaningfully they contribute to the worlds they inhabit.

Drawing on global experiences, including those of institutions that have intentionally resisted rankings or reframed success on their own terms, this chapter offers a roadmap for universities ready to depart from the race and build models of success rooted in authenticity (Ringel, 2021). It is not a call for complacency, nor a rejection of accountability. Rather, it is an invitation to higher education leaders, faculty, students, and policymakers to reimagine what it means to thrive—not in competition, but in coherence with one's values, context, and mission.

The Tyranny of Numbers: Questioning the Dominance of Rankings

It begins innocently enough—with a list. A simple table of universities, neatly ordered, each tethered to a number. First place. Fifth. One hundred and twenty-third. There's something oddly comforting about it all: the illusion of clarity, the seduction of objectivity. The list promises a shortcut, a way to know who's best without really needing to look too closely. It offers administrators their bragging rights, governments their justification for funding decisions, students their compass in a sea of uncertainty. And yet, behind this carefully polished veneer, behind the glitter of quantification, lies something far more troubling—a logic that reduces the infinitely complex tapestry of higher education into an algorithmic hierarchy. A tyranny not of iron fists, but of digits.

Rankings thrive on a simple idea: that value can be measured, compared, and ultimately judged (Hamann & Ringel, 2023). That excellence is a thing with sharp edges and clear borders, something you can count. And so, universities across the globe spend years and fortunes trying to "improve"—a euphemism, often, for climbing higher in someone else's schema. They tweak faculty-student ratios, chase citations, hire consultants, redesign websites, rename departments to sound more "global," and tailor their missions to align with what will "score." And the saddest part? Much of this isn't about real transformation—it's performance, staged for the algorithms.

Let's not romanticize the past—universities have always grappled with elitism, hierarchy, and exclusion. But rankings have added a peculiar new pressure: the compulsion to be legible to an external gaze that doesn't understand the soul of a place. That gaze doesn't see the quiet strength of a university that nurtures first-generation students. It doesn't count the impact of a rural campus offering life-saving medical outreach. It doesn't recognize the brilliance of an underfunded institution producing poetry that reshapes national identity. The ranking systems don't value nuance, resilience, or cultural rootedness (Tripathi & Nundy, 2025). They can't. They weren't built for that.

Instead, they favor what's already visible, already privileged. Research-intensive universities with vast endowments, global brand recognition, and English-language publication output dominate the charts (Adam, 2021). The more you fit the mold, the more you're rewarded. It's no surprise then that universities in the Global South often find themselves ranked dismally low, regardless of how meaningfully they serve their communities. Or that disciplines like philosophy, indigenous studies, or community health are sidelined in favor of high-impact-factor sciences and business research.

This isn't just a misrepresentation—it's a distortion. When the currency of excellence becomes narrow metrics, institutions recalibrate themselves not toward

their deepest values but toward what will "count." They build labs instead of libraries, fund publication over pedagogy, and prioritize visibility over substance. A university might drastically improve the livelihoods of its surrounding community, yet still plummet in rankings because it failed to publish in "recognized" journals or attract enough international faculty (Edu, 2025). Meanwhile, another institution that alienates its local population but checks the right boxes may ascend.

There's a kind of epistemic violence in this. A subtle erasure of the multiple ways in which knowledge can be created, transmitted, and lived. Rankings enshrine a single model of what a university should be: globally oriented, research-heavy, output-obsessed, market-friendly (De la Poza et al, 2021). All else is deviation. This homogenization stifles experimentation. It punishes risk-taking. It tells universities, especially those on the margins, that success means abandoning who they are to mimic someone else's blueprint.

What's worse, the tools used to generate these rankings are often opaque, inconsistent, and riddled with methodological flaws. Indicators shift from year to year. Weightings change. Data is self-reported, unverifiable, and in some cases, strategically massaged. The veneer of objectivity is just that—a veneer. The metrics are far from neutral; they reflect the biases of their creators and the interests of the academic-industrial complex. But still, we treat them as gospel.

There's a strange irony here. Universities, which teach critical thinking, inquiry, and the interrogation of dominant narratives, rarely turn that same lens on the rankings that govern them (Smith & Seal, 2021). Why is that? Perhaps because rankings are addictive. They offer a dopamine hit with every climb. They provide a narrative of progress, even when that progress is cosmetic. They give boards and politicians something to boast about. But this addiction has costs. It narrows our imagination of what a university can be. It leads to the neglect of teaching, the casualization of academic labor, and the erosion of disciplines that don't serve market imperatives.

There's also the emotional toll—on academics pressured to publish endlessly, on administrators navigating impossible expectations, on students reduced to data points. And let's not forget the institutions that, knowing they'll never make the top 500, start to feel invisible, irrelevant. They're not. But the rankings whisper otherwise. And what of excellence itself? Is it really captured by citation counts and faculty ratios? Or is it something messier, harder to pin down? Maybe excellence is a professor who transforms the life of a struggling student (Sørensen & Traweek, 2022). Maybe it's a university that refuses to abandon its mother tongue in favor of English, despite the global market. Maybe it's research that doesn't end up in Nature or Science but leads to cleaner water for a forgotten village. These forms of excellence don't show up on rankings. But they matter. Deeply.

We need to say this out loud: the emperor has no clothes. Rankings are not measures of worth. They're reflections of power (Welsh, 2021). And unless we learn

to see them as such, we risk perpetuating a deeply inequitable and unimaginative vision of higher education. But it's not all despair. Around the world, some institutions are beginning to push back. They're developing alternative indicators rooted in mission and context. They're forming networks of solidarity that challenge the ranking orthodoxy. They're choosing to tell their own stories, not wait for validation from abroad. It's not easy—stepping away from the rankings feels risky, even foolish. But perhaps the real folly is in believing that a number defines who we are.

In the end, education is about transformation, not performance. The tyranny of numbers may be strong, but it is not invincible. What's required is not just critique, but courage—the courage to reclaim our institutions from the metrics that misrepresent them, and to dream, once more, of what they could be.

Excellence Reimagined: Values, Mission, and Social Impact

Excellence, once a noble aspiration wrapped in the cloth of intellectual integrity, ethical service, and human development, now too often wears the sharp suit of metrics and marketability. It's been trimmed and repackaged to fit the spreadsheets of global rankings and the shiny pamphlets of university branding campaigns. Yet, what if we peeled back the gloss, unfastened the institutional necktie, and sat with a different kind of excellence—one that resists numbers, one that breathes, one that remembers where it came from?

This isn't some nostalgic yearning for a golden academic past that never truly existed. It's a reckoning with the fact that our current model has, in many places, lost its compass. When a university begins to see its core mission as a chase for citations, international partnerships for the sake of optics, and graduate employability defined purely by salary brackets, something vital erodes beneath the surface (Teräs et al, 2022). Excellence becomes hollow. It rings loud, but not deep.

Universities weren't born from rankings. They weren't forged in the pursuit of visibility or data analytics dashboards (Kayyali, 2020). They emerged from a deeper human urge—to seek truth, to preserve knowledge, to question the world, and to serve it. Excellence, in that context, wasn't about being the best in comparison to others; it was about being true to one's purpose. It was about fidelity to a mission, not conformity to a model. And yet, it's not easy to talk about values without sounding preachy or vague. That's part of the problem: we've been trained to treat values as optional footnotes, flowery statements for mission pages that no one reads. But values—real ones, not slogans—are what shape institutional identity. They whisper through the corridors of curriculum design. They echo in hiring decisions, in research priorities, in the way we treat students when no one is watching. An institution that claims equity but excludes disabled students from its built environment, or that champions global justice while underpaying its adjunct faculty, betrays its

own script. Excellence built on broken promises is a house of mirrors—reflective, dazzling, but empty.

What if we turned the lens? What if we asked not who is number one, but who is making a meaningful difference? Not which university has the most global reach, but which has the deepest local roots? Social impact, as a measure of excellence, can't be captured in a tidy statistic. It spills over. It's messy. It's a professor working unpaid overtime to mentor a student from a refugee background. It's a small regional college offering agricultural training that revitalizes rural economies. It's a research center that chooses to publish in the local language, reaching policymakers who otherwise wouldn't read it (Walsh et al, 2023). These acts won't win you ranking points. But they just might change lives.

There's something rebellious about centering mission over metrics in an age that rewards conformity. And yet, that's where authentic excellence often lives—in defiance of standardization. A university grounded in its context, aware of its unique history, and unapologetic about its mission, has a power that no global index can measure (Bürger & Fiates, 2024). But for this to work, the mission can't be ornamental. It must be a living document, revisited, wrestled with, reinterpreted as conditions evolve. The mission, when taken seriously, becomes a north star. It helps institutions make hard choices—what to fund, what to let go, where to take risks. It offers integrity in a landscape flooded with imitation.

Still, let's not pretend this shift is easy. The language of values and mission often clashes with the language of donors, governments, and even students trained to think in return-on-investment terms (Kaul, 2022). Social impact is slow. It's rarely flashy. It doesn't fit neatly into annual reports. But it matters. And the universities that lean into this work often discover something surprising: a kind of quiet resilience. When you serve your community with authenticity, when you treat education as a form of care rather than a commodity, people notice—even if they don't always shout it from the rooftops.

What does it mean, then, to reimagine excellence? It means asking different questions. Not "How do we compete globally?" but "How do we heal locally?" Not "How many papers did we publish?" but "Whose voices are we amplifying?" Not "How efficient are our outputs?" but "How humane is our culture?" It means building evaluation systems that reward collaboration over competition, humility over hubris, and depth over breadth. It means recognizing that some of the most valuable things universities do—building community trust, fostering intergenerational learning, challenging injustice—don't fit neatly into KPIs (Devis-Rozental, & Clarke, 2024).

Of course, not all universities are the same, and they shouldn't be. Excellence will look different in a polytechnic serving adult learners than it will in a centuries-old research university (Penprase & Pickus, 2023). And that's the point: to redefine excellence in ways that honor diversity, rather than flatten it. A one-size-fits-all

model kills creativity. It pushes institutions into strategic plans they don't believe in, just to survive in the ecosystem. True excellence grows from alignment between values, mission, and practice.

Sometimes, the impact of a university isn't known until decades later. A single education program might catalyze a cultural renaissance (Wang, 2025). A forgotten community project might lay the groundwork for social policy reform. These things don't show up in annual rankings, but they are the threads from which societal progress is woven. Perhaps the question isn't whether universities should chase rankings, but whether they can afford to. Because the more we pursue artificial forms of excellence, the more we risk losing what made the institution meaningful to begin with. And yes, there's a cost to choosing mission over metrics. Funding might be harder to secure. Media attention might be fickle. Accreditation bodies might frown. But the long game belongs to those who build trust, not trends. In a world fraying at the edges—facing ecological collapse, technological upheaval, and growing inequality—what we need are not just high-performing universities, but high-principled ones. Institutions that know who they are. That stand for something. That educate not just skilled workers, but thoughtful citizens capable of navigating a fractured world with compassion and courage.

Reimagining excellence also requires a cultural shift within academia itself (Whittaker & Montgomery, 2022). It means rethinking what counts as scholarly labor, valuing the emotional and relational work that sustains learning environments. It means making room for alternative epistemologies, community-engaged scholarship, and modes of inquiry that don't chase prestige but pursue justice. It means listening—to students, to communities, to the land.

Somewhere along the way, we confused visibility with value. But not all that glitters is gold. And not all that's quiet is insignificant. Sometimes, the most radical work happens in the margins. Sometimes, excellence hums rather than shouts. Universities have a choice. To continue performing for the algorithmic gaze, or to turn inward and ask what really matters (Gourlay, 2025). To mold themselves into what the rankings reward, or to become places where new worlds are imagined and nurtured. It's not an easy choice, and the pressures to conform are real. But the rewards of fidelity—to mission, to values, to people—are deeper than any trophy shelf. They are felt in the lives touched, the paradigms shifted, the futures made possible. Excellence, reimagined, doesn't chase the spotlight. It creates light. It doesn't need a rank to justify its worth. Its impact is written in stories, not scores. And its legacy? Not a number, but a difference.

Holistic Evaluation: Moving Beyond Metrics to Meaning

Evaluation, at its core, is an attempt to grasp the intangible. To make sense of value. To determine whether something—an action, an institution, a human endeavor—has fulfilled its purpose, served its community, lived up to its promise. And yet, somewhere along the line, the practice of evaluation in higher education lost its compass and became more about what could be counted than what truly counts. We fell under the spell of precision, built entire reputations on abstract numbers, and allowed the messier, richer dimensions of academic life to slip through the cracks of quantification. The irony stings: in trying to measure quality, we've begun to erode it (Kayyali, 2023 C). But what if we turned the question inside out? What if, instead of asking how best to quantify excellence, we asked how to recognize it in its full complexity—its texture, its contradictions, its emotional resonance? What if we admitted, plainly and without embarrassment, that some of the most important things universities do can't be reduced to a data point or performance indicator?

This is not a manifesto against accountability. Institutions must be answerable—for public funds, for student futures, for the societal trust they wield. But the current landscape has narrowed accountability into compliance. And compliance, as any thoughtful educator knows, is not the same thing as care, or growth, or truth. A university can "perform" brilliantly on the metrics—sky-high graduation rates, faculty with h-indexes that sparkle, student satisfaction scores curated into graphs—and still be a place where learning is superficial, burnout is normalized, and ethical lapses go unspoken (Woertz et al, 2024). Conversely, an institution struggling on paper may be a lifeline for its region, a sanctuary for the unheard, a site of quiet innovation.

Holistic evaluation, then, isn't a rejection of measurement. It's a rebalancing. It's a refusal to let the easily measurable dominate the narrative. It begins by widening the frame—by recognizing that education is relational, context-dependent, and temporally layered. Not everything unfolds neatly within the boundaries of a five-year plan or an annual report. Some impacts take decades to show. Some can only be understood from the vantage point of those directly affected: students, communities, faculty, the environment. To evaluate holistically is to enter a space of listening. It's less about ranking and more about understanding (Rafique et al, 2023). It asks not just what was achieved, but how, and for whom, and at what cost. It acknowledges that a student's success is shaped not only by curriculum design but by financial precarity, mental health support, and the availability of mentors who see them fully. It understands that research impact isn't always about citations—it might be about shifting public discourse, influencing local policy, or preserving endangered knowledge traditions.

Yet the dominant evaluation frameworks rarely ask these questions. They prefer things that look tidy in tables and dashboards: throughput, impact factor, employment

rate, income differentials. These metrics have their place—they offer a snapshot, a pattern, sometimes even a warning sign. But they're not the whole picture. And when they're treated as such, something precious is lost. The soul of the institution—its ethos, its commitments, its quiet acts of resistance or generosity—gets flattened into a series of benchmarks. So how might a holistic model look in practice? For one, it would be deeply contextual. It would start by asking the institution itself: what is your mission? What are your values? What does success look like *for you*, in *your* setting, with *your* community? A rural university focused on decolonial pedagogy and indigenous empowerment shouldn't be held to the same evaluative standards as a globally networked, research-intensive urban university. That's not equity; that's erasure.

Holistic evaluation would also be narrative-rich. Numbers can't speak for themselves—they need stories, testimonies, texture (Roberts et al, 2021). This means inviting multiple perspectives into the process, especially those typically excluded: students with disabilities, faculty on precarious contracts, community members whose lives intersect with the university in informal but essential ways. Their voices aren't a supplement—they're central. And it would be iterative. Not a one-time audit, but an ongoing, reflective practice. Institutions change. So, should our methods of understanding them. Evaluation becomes less about judgment and more about learning. Less about proving, more about improving. A space where vulnerability is possible, where failures can be named without shame, where unexpected forms of excellence are celebrated.

Naturally, this kind of evaluation resists standardization, which makes it harder to scale or compare. That's a feature, not a bug. The obsession with comparability is what led us down the rankings rabbit hole to begin with. Universities are not products on a shelf. They are living, breathing ecosystems shaped by history, politics, geography, and the aspirations of those who inhabit them. Trying to flatten all of that into a universal index is a fool's errand. Of course, shifting toward holistic evaluation isn't just a technical change—it's a cultural one. It requires institutions to step away from the performative logic that's seeped into so many corners of academic life (Fleming, 2021). It demands a kind of intellectual honesty, a willingness to admit that not everything we've been doing is working, and that some of what matters most hasn't been getting the attention it deserves. And it demands courage. Because the current system has its rewards. High rankings attract students, donors, media attention. They make governments smile. Letting go of that validation—even partially—can feel like stepping into a fog. But perhaps the deeper reward lies elsewhere: in the freedom to tell your own story, in the power to define success on your own terms, in the quiet confidence that comes from knowing your work is rooted in real need, not abstract metrics.

The irony is that the institutions most fearful of leaving the comfort of metrics are often those with the most to gain from a more nuanced form of evaluation. Consider the small universities with deep local ties, whose faculty are embedded in community projects, whose students go on to become public school teachers, social workers, local activists (Kinloch et al, 2021). These contributions don't shine in the rankings. But they matter. Holistic evaluation would recognize their worth. Would hold space for their complexity.

There's also something deeply humanizing about this approach. Evaluation becomes less a bureaucratic ritual and more a form of care. A way of attending to the life of the institution, of asking: how are we doing, really? What's growing here, and what's withering? Who's thriving, and who's being left behind? These aren't questions a spreadsheet can answer. But they are questions worth asking. Some might say this is too idealistic, too messy, too hard to implement. But maybe that's the point. Maybe what we need isn't another elegant framework, but a willingness to dwell in the mess. To sit with the contradictions. To hold both the data and the story. To recognize that evaluation is not a final judgment but a form of ongoing discernment (Nathaniel et al, 2021). And maybe, just maybe, this kind of evaluation would remind us why we're here in the first place. Not to outperform each other. Not to chase credentials. But to serve. To learn. To imagine. To create spaces where knowledge can breathe and where people, in all their complexity, can find something that feels like home.

When evaluation becomes a mirror rather than a measuring tape, something shifts. It stops being an act of scrutiny and becomes an act of recognition. Not just of what has been achieved, but of what is becoming possible. Of who we are, and who we might yet become. Let that be the new ambition: not to be better than others, but to be better at being ourselves. Not to rank higher, but to mean more. Not to perfect the metrics, but to remember the mission. That's where the heart of holistic evaluation lies—in refusing to settle for what's easy to measure, and reaching instead for what's truly worth understanding.

Strategies for Institutional Success Outside the Ranking Paradigm

Escaping the gravitational pull of global university rankings isn't just a matter of stepping sideways—it's an act of cultural resistance, a shift in institutional consciousness, and, at times, a leap of faith (Rosenberg, 2023). Success outside the ranking paradigm doesn't mean abandoning standards or aspirations; it means recalibrating what success looks like, how it's pursued, and who it ultimately serves. It's a slower

path, perhaps less dazzling, but arguably more enduring. One built on coherence rather than competition, purpose rather than posturing.

There's no single formula, no ready-made blueprint, no polished ten-step guide hanging in an administrator's office. And perhaps that's the point: this isn't about mimicry. Institutions that thrive outside the metrics are those that dare to author their own narrative, that find clarity in their local soil rather than in someone else's spotlight. The strategies they deploy are often modest in appearance, subtle in execution, but radical in implication. They begin, usually, not with rebranding, but with reflection.

First comes the inward turn—the re-centering of mission. It sounds abstract, maybe even sentimental, but this is where the tectonic shift begins. When an institution genuinely asks itself why it exists—not rhetorically, but with uncomfortable honesty—it lays the groundwork for a kind of integrity that rankings can't quantify (Kayyali, 2023 D). This isn't about mission statements polished for accreditation reports; it's about interrogating purpose in board meetings, in faculty retreats, in casual conversations among staff. What are we here to do? Who are we responsible to? What kind of world are we helping to shape? Those questions can unsettle, even divide—but they also reveal the contours of an institution's soul.

From that reckoning, priorities emerge. And with them, decisions—real, consequential ones. A university that values access might choose to expand its evening courses, even if they're less "efficient." One that champions cultural preservation may invest in regional language departments over shiny, English-only global partnerships (Müller et al, 2023). An institution rooted in a conflict zone may prioritize peacebuilding programs, even if they attract less funding than AI research. These choices aren't always strategic in the traditional sense; they're principled. And that distinction matters.

One of the most powerful strategies, then, is contextual fidelity—the practice of staying close to one's place, people, and problems. Too often, institutions chase relevance in distant forums while losing sight of the needs next door. But those who succeed outside the rankings tend to flip the lens: they build deep, reciprocal relationships with their immediate communities. They see local engagement not as charity or outreach, but as scholarship, as knowledge production, as mission fulfillment. Community-based research, service-learning programs, and collaborative design labs become central—not peripheral—features of the academic landscape (Gual, 2024).

These universities don't just ask what knowledge they can produce; they ask who they're producing it with. And for what? The result is not always glamorous, but it is unmistakably meaningful. A study on food security co-created with local farmers may never make it to an international journal, but it might change how a village eats. A literacy program run by students in underserved neighborhoods won't

yield publication metrics, but it might ignite a child's future (Hanna, 2022). This is success by another name—unranked, perhaps, but undeniable.

To support such missions, governance must evolve. Institutions operating outside the rankings can't afford bureaucracies obsessed with KPI dashboards and branding consultants. What they need is participatory leadership—decision-making structures that invite faculty, staff, students, and even community members into the room. It's slower. Sometimes messier. But it fosters buy-in, transparency, and, critically, alignment. When a university's internal culture reflects its external commitments, when people at every level feel they're shaping the mission rather than just executing it, a different kind of momentum builds.

In this light, success is less about hierarchy and more about cohesion. It's about ensuring that hiring practices, curriculum development, research funding, and student support all pull in the same ethical direction. And that requires more than strategy documents. It requires relational trust. It means de-siloing departments, creating space for cross-disciplinary dialogue, nurturing unlikely alliances between tech labs and theater groups, between economists and ecologists, between academics and activists. These moments of friction—productive, creative, at times even uncomfortable—can yield insights no metric could predict.

Yet it would be naive to ignore the economic pressures at play. Universities still need to survive, to compete for resources, to demonstrate value to governments, students, and donors (McPherson & Schapiro, 2021). Success outside the rankings isn't about turning a blind eye to these realities—it's about responding to them differently. Some institutions diversify their revenue through mission-aligned partnerships: social enterprises, cooperative research centers, ethical licensing agreements. Others adopt open-source publishing models, reducing their dependence on high-impact journals and subscription databases. Many leverage digital tools not for surveillance or marketing, but to expand access—offering flexible, low-cost learning opportunities to those who've been historically excluded.

Still others embrace what might be called slow academia. Not in the sense of inefficiency, but in the sense of intentionality. Faculty are encouraged to teach fewer courses but more deeply. Research timelines are extended to allow for reflection, iteration, dialogue. Assessment focuses on depth rather than breadth, on learning rather than grading. Students are seen not as customers, but as co-learners (van den Beemt et al, 2023). This shift—difficult to quantify—can radically alter the ethos of a campus.

Another powerful strategy lies in epistemic humility. Institutions that step away from the rankings often recognize that they don't have all the answers—and that's precisely why they matter (Rosen & Weiss, 2022). They open themselves to other ways of knowing: indigenous knowledge systems, oral traditions, embodied practices, community storytelling. They challenge the supremacy of the written

word, the journal article, the "expert." In doing so, they create space for marginal voices to become central. They understand that knowledge is not a commodity to be hoarded, but a gift to be shared. And that sharing ripples outward. Universities that resist the race to the top often become conveners—hosting dialogues across sectors, building coalitions around justice, offering sanctuary to ideas too bold for the mainstream. Their success lies not in outperforming peers, but in outloving the system. In refusing to commodify curiosity. In reminding society that education, at its best, is a collective endeavor.

To sustain these efforts, storytelling becomes essential. When you're not in the rankings, the world may not notice you. So you tell your own story—boldly, vulnerably, truthfully. You publish reflective reports, create multimedia platforms, celebrate local impact. You turn down the volume on prestige and turn up the volume on purpose. Not to impress, but to inspire. Not to market, but to model another way.

Of course, none of this is easy. Institutions that walk this path face skepticism, resource constraints, internal resistance. Some days, the temptation to chase recognition can be overwhelming. But those that persist often discover something rare: an alignment between what they say and what they do. Between what they claim to value and how they actually operate. That integrity becomes their competitive advantage—even if no one's ranking it. And so, institutional success outside the ranking paradigm is not a fantasy. It's happening—in small colleges in rural corners, in urban universities grounded in social justice, in transdisciplinary hubs that defy categorization. These institutions remind us that the purpose of higher education was never to ascend lists, but to uplift lives (Hale, 2023). Their strategies are not shortcuts—they are long, winding roads paved with listening, with risk-taking, with a refusal to play by rules that undermine the very essence of learning.

They teach us that there are many ways to be excellent. That metrics alone cannot define meaning. That the deepest form of success may not be external validation, but internal coherence. And that, in a world addicted to speed, visibility, and performance, there is radical power in choosing to be slow, grounded, and true. Perhaps, then, the most powerful strategy is this: to stop asking how to win the game, and start asking whether the game is worth playing at all. Some institutions will continue to run the rankings race. Let them. But others—those willing to chart their own course—may just redefine what it means to succeed. Not by being the best, but by being something far rarer: whole.

A Call to Courage: Reclaiming Higher Education's Purpose

There is a quiet ache running through the halls of many universities today, a kind of existential fatigue masked by the hum of institutional routines, glossy strategic plans, and relentless ambition. Amid the ceaseless buzz of rankings, funding dead-

lines, enrollment targets, and employability metrics, something essential has been pushed to the margins—not deliberately, not maliciously, but through slow erosion, like the soft crumbling of stone under constant wind. What's been fading isn't just idealism or innocence. It's purpose.

To speak of reclaiming higher education's purpose is to acknowledge that it's been, in many ways, obscured. Not lost entirely—flickers of it still burn in certain classrooms, in mentoring conversations after hours, in research quietly rooted in justice rather than journals. But at scale, the academy has drifted. It has become reactive, image-conscious, addicted to the immediate. It excels at managing, at branding, at performing. But what about dreaming? What about asking difficult questions not for competitive advantage, but because they need to be asked?

Courage, in this context, doesn't mean grand heroics. It means something quieter, more sustained, and far less glamorous: the courage to slow down in a world obsessed with speed. To say no when the pressure to say yes is overwhelming. To make choices that might cost visibility, but preserve integrity. It means resisting the tide—not out of stubbornness, but out of love. Because to care deeply about the university as a space of possibility is to refuse its reduction to a corporate simulacrum. But resistance takes many forms. And it begins, more often than not, with a question that no data dashboard can answer: *What are we here for, really?* That deceptively simple query should haunt every faculty senate, every boardroom, every syllabus. Not because it's trendy or philosophical, but because it cuts through the noise. Are we educating citizens or producing labor-market units? Are we advancing knowledge or monetizing it? Are we nurturing curiosity or packaging credentials?

Reclaiming purpose means remembering what the university is uniquely positioned to do—not what it has become habituated to doing (Wright, 2024). It is, or ought to be, one of the few places in society where long thinking is not only possible but protected. Where failure is part of the process, not a liability. Where disagreement is encouraged, not pathologized. Where ideas are treated not as commodities but as communal resources. In short, the university should be a sanctuary for slow, rigorous, and messy exploration—particularly in a world that increasingly treats complexity as inconvenience (Jackson, 2023). But that vision demands more than nostalgia. It calls for bravery. Because reclaiming purpose isn't just about adding new programs or tweaking mission statements. It's about structural shifts that often require letting go: letting go of the illusion of universal metrics, of the comforting clarity of rankings, of the false security of prestige. It's about telling donors and policymakers, sometimes uncomfortably, that impact can't always be measured quarterly. That not all knowledge pays dividends. That some forms of learning take decades to bear fruit, if they ever do.

To act on that truth means redesigning systems—rethinking how we reward faculty, how we assess students, how we define success. It might mean promoting a lecturer

not for citation counts, but for mentorship (Johnson & Griffin, 2024). It might mean protecting departments that don't generate revenue but offer moral imagination. It might mean giving students space to fail—really fail—and learn from it without bureaucratic punishment. These are not popular moves. But they are necessary if the university is to remain something more than a high-end credentialing machine. And then there is the matter of voice. Reclaiming purpose requires that institutions find, and use, their voices—not just in promotional material, but in public discourse. A courageous university does not remain neutral in the face of injustice. It does not sit silently as democracies erode, ecosystems collapse, or lives are devalued for profit. It teaches not just content, but conscience. It educates not only minds, but hearts. That's not activism. That's relevance. And without relevance, purpose dissolves.

Of course, not every university will take the same path. Context matters. Mission matters. But across the board, the question remains: are we shaping institutions to serve the needs of students and society, or are we molding them to serve the system itself—feeding back into a cycle of competition, conformity, and control? The honest answer, more often than we'd like to admit, is the latter. This is where courage meets design. Structures create behaviors. And if our structures reward publication over pedagogy, competition over collaboration, compliance over creativity, then those are the behaviors that will thrive. Changing the culture of the university, then, requires changing its scaffolding (Gunawardena & Wilson, 2021). It's not about asking individuals to be brave in broken systems. It's about fixing the systems themselves.

That means reevaluating funding models that tie success to performance indicators few believe in. It means reimagining accreditation processes that prioritize checklists over character. It means building evaluation frameworks that make space for the unquantifiable: for ethical labor, for emotional labor, for the work of sustaining learning environments that may never make headlines but change lives daily.

It also means facing the internal contradictions. Universities love to talk about innovation, but punish risk. They claim to value diversity, but homogenize thought (Langlitz & de Althaus, 2024). They promote interdisciplinary work, but silo departments. To reclaim purpose is to name those tensions—and then, painstakingly, to address them. Not with sweeping statements, but with careful, often unglamorous work: new hiring policies, alternative forms of promotion, curricular reforms driven by students and communities, not just consultants. And let's not romanticize. This work is exhausting. It asks much of those already stretched thin—faculty caught between grading loads and research demands, administrators trying to shield their teams from burnout while managing shrinking budgets. But fatigue is not a reason to retreat into cynicism. If anything, it's a sign that the current model isn't sustainable. Reclaiming purpose might just be the only way out of the exhaustion.

Some institutions are already walking this path. Quietly, often without fanfare, they are reimagining the university as a site of healing, of justice, of deep listening.

They are embedding community engagement into research design. They are co-creating syllabi with students. They are decentering Eurocentric canons, challenging extractive knowledge models, making room for ways of knowing long silenced by empire and elitism. They are still universities, still educating, still researching—but on their own terms (Kayyali, 2023 A). And that makes all the difference.

Their courage isn't loud, but it's contagious. It invites others to ask: what if we stopped chasing legitimacy from those who do not understand our work? What if we built institutions that don't need to prove themselves constantly, because they are trusted by the people who matter? That trust doesn't come from rankings. It comes from relevance. From relationship. From showing up—not just in global forums, but in neighborhoods, in prisons, in forests, in refugee camps. In all the places where knowledge meets life.

This is not an argument for lowering standards. It's a call for rethinking what the standards are, and who gets to set them. For too long, we've outsourced purpose to the architects of metrics, assuming they know best. But what if they don't? What if purpose is something we discover not by looking upward for validation, but by looking outward—and inward—for truth?

To reclaim higher education's purpose is to ask questions the system would rather we didn't. It's to risk being called idealistic, even naïve. But perhaps naïveté is underrated. Perhaps it takes a certain kind of innocence—unspoiled by cynicism, unburdened by institutional habit—to remember that universities were never meant to be engines of elite reproduction. They were meant to be places of encounter. Of imagination. Of becoming.

The world doesn't need better-ranked universities. It needs braver ones (Trevisan, 2022). Not just more competitive institutions, but more compassionate ones. Not just knowledge producers, but wisdom keepers. Not just skilled graduates, but awakened citizens capable of asking not only "What can I do?" but "What should be done?" So, let this be a call—not to perfection, but to presence. To return, with humility and clarity, to the deep well of purpose from which the university once drew its strength. To remember that success, in the truest sense, is not a line climbed, but a life touched. Not a number, but a name. And let that be the legacy we choose—not a place on a list, but a place in the lives of those we serve. Let us reclaim, rebuild, and reimagine—not out of nostalgia, but out of necessity. The future of higher education won't be found in rankings. It will be found in courage.

CONCLUSION

The time has come for higher education to ask itself a fundamental question: what is the university for? In the noise of rankings, performance indicators, and

benchmarking reports, the quiet but vital mission of the university—to cultivate knowledge, foster critical inquiry, and serve humanity—has too often been drowned out. This chapter has argued that the current fixation on global university rankings, while not inherently malevolent, has led many institutions astray. In privileging what is countable over what is meaningful, universities risk becoming corporations of credentials rather than communities of learning.

Excellence, in its deepest sense, cannot be ranked. It emerges not from algorithmic optimization but from purpose, courage, and care. The most impactful universities may not always publish in elite journals or boast Nobel laureates. Instead, they may be found quietly transforming their communities, developing inclusive pedagogy, nurturing the arts and humanities, protecting indigenous knowledge systems, and standing firm against commodification. These forms of excellence are no less rigorous—but they resist simplification. They flourish in complexity, in values, and in relationships.

To move forward, institutions must summon the will to define success on their own terms. This means crafting institutional narratives that reflect distinct missions rather than borrowed benchmarks. It means assessing impact through local relevance, student growth, and ethical leadership, rather than citation metrics or media visibility. It requires policymakers to resist the easy appeal of league tables and instead support pluralism, equity, and innovation in higher education systems. And it calls on academics themselves to engage in self-reflection—to ask whether their work, however highly cited, truly matters in the lives of their students and societies.

Reclaiming the soul of the university is not about nostalgia. It is about resisting the homogenizing effects of rankings and embracing the radical diversity of institutional identities. It is about restoring education to its rightful place as a public good rather than a competitive market. And it is about remembering that the university is not a brand, but a beacon—a site of resistance, imagination, and transformation.

In redefining excellence, we do not discard the need for quality, accountability, or ambition. Rather, we elevate these aspirations by anchoring them in justice, context, and integrity. The university that dares to measure itself by its contribution to human flourishing, rather than its position on a list, may not rise in the rankings. But it may rise in relevance, in meaning, and in memory. And that, ultimately, is the kind of success worth striving for.

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Chapter 6
How Rankings Impact Academic Freedom and Institutional Autonomy

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how global university rankings impact academic freedom and institutional autonomy in higher education. Despite their growing influence, rankings create tensions with core academic values through their methodology, which emphasizes research output over teaching quality and neglects academic freedom measures. The analysis reveals how the pursuit of higher rankings affects research priorities, teaching practices, and administrative decision-making across different regions and institutional contexts. Rankings often promote a homogenized model of excellence that can lead to mission drift and convergence of institutional identities. While established universities in resource-rich environments may better withstand ranking pressures, institutions in the Global South face particular challenges in balancing international metrics with local needs. The chapter concludes with actionable recommendations for universities, ranking organizations, and policymakers to preserve academic values while engaging with global comparisons.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Global university rankings have risen to prominence as a defining feature of the contemporary higher education landscape. Originating in the early 2000s with systems like the Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) and

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later the Times Higher Education (THE) and QS rankings, these league tables now exert considerable influence on universities, governments, and the public worldwide. *Academic freedom* – the freedom of scholars and students to pursue knowledge, research, and teaching without undue external interference – and *institutional autonomy* – a university's ability to govern itself and set its academic direction independently – are core values of higher education. Yet the rise of rankings has created tensions and paradoxes regarding these values. On one hand, rankings are perceived as objective benchmarks of quality in a global "market" of higher education. On the other hand, the methodologies and incentives of rankings often conflict with the traditional academic mission and freedoms of universities. This conflict is sometimes termed the "ranking paradox," wherein the more rankings are criticized on academic grounds, the more powerful they seem to become in shaping behavior (Leiber, 2017; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007; Robinson, 2013; Saisana et al., 2011).

There is growing concern that the chase for higher rankings may erode academic freedom and constrain institutional autonomy. For example, rankings reduce the multifaceted work of a university to a single numerical position, an approach that "*requires that [the] complex aspects of a university be reduced to a number no matter how absurd the exercise becomes*" (Robinson, 2013). Such simplification risks prioritizing what can be easily measured over what is educationally meaningful. Indeed, many ranking indicators (research publications, citations, income, etc.) align more with a university's wealth and resources than with its academic quality.

This chapter explores how global ranking systems impact academic freedom and institutional autonomy. It surveys the scholarly literature and international case studies from both established and emerging institutions (with attention to the Global South) to examine impacts on research priorities, curriculum and teaching practices, and administrative decision-making. It also considers cultural and regional variations in these impacts, as well as implications for universities' strategic autonomy and identity. Actionable recommendations are provided for universities, ranking agencies, and policymakers to balance the pressures of the "ranking game" with the preservation of core academic values. The chapter concludes with a nuanced discussion on the future role of rankings in shaping global higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Rise of Rankings and the Ranking Paradox

In the past two decades, global university rankings have "cemented the notion of a world university market arranged in a single 'league table'" of excellence. The

arrival of these rankings tapped into a zeitgeist of competition and accountability in higher education, accelerating their influence. Marginson and van der Wende (2007) observe that both ARWU and THE rankings were rapidly and widely publicized, fueling "*intranational and international competitive pressures*" in the sector. As a result, many universities, even those outside the elite tier, felt compelled to pay attention to rankings as a measure of status. This swift rise has occurred despite extensive scholarly criticism of ranking methodologies – a phenomenon often noted as paradoxical. Social scientists have pointed out that "*most pervasive concern with university rankings [is] that what makes a good university simply cannot be accurately captured statistically*" (Robinson, 2013). Indeed, the more that experts highlight rankings' flaws, the more public fascination (and institutional compliance) with rankings seems to grow (Leiber, 2017; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007).

A key issue is that global rankings rely on proxy metrics and composite indicators that simplify educational quality. As Robinson (2013) notes, rankings create an "*illusion that there is a clear and identifiable distinction between universities*" (Robinson, 2013) even when differences are statistically trivial or based on questionable weighted formulas. The aggregation into a single score or ordinal position can mask uncertainty and error, leading stakeholders to over-interpret small rank differences. This simplification contributes to what many call the "league table" mentality or ranking "fetish." Universities that rank highly trumpet these results for reputation, while those ranked lower feel pressure to "catch up," sometimes at any cost. Morphew and Swanson (2011) find that universities have internalized rankings as "*a means of assuring internal actors that the institution is on course towards its goals*" and as "*a signal flare…to highlight their quality for external constituents*" (Morphew & Swanson, 2011). In other words, rankings have been embraced as convenient (if imperfect) metrics to communicate success, both internally and externally. The seeming objectivity of numbers provides a powerful if simplistic assurance of quality (Leiber, 2017).

However, numerous studies have detailed methodological problems in popular ranking systems. Common critiques include:

(a) Proxy bias: Rankings emphasize metrics like research output, citations, faculty credentials, and finances, which correlate with wealth and legacy rather than teaching excellence or societal impact. As a result, "the universities that appear at or near the top of the major rankings are 'distinguished by large budgets, large endowments, [and] access to large pools of highly developed human capital'"– in short, institutional wealth and age, as observed by Hazelkorn's research (Hazelkorn, 2009a, 2009a, 2013).
(b) Reputational surveys: Many rankings incorporate academic or employer reputation surveys, whose results often reflect existing prestige biases. Participants

may be unfamiliar with a substantial fraction of the institutions they rate, leading to circular reinforcement of notoriety rather than fresh evaluation of quality.

(c) Overemphasis on research outputs: Almost all global rankings give disproportionate weight to research volume and citation counts as proxies for quality As Altbach (2006, 2010) and others argue, raw publication counts do not necessarily indicate research impact or quality, and citation databases (like Web of Science/ ISI or Scopus) are dominated by English-language journals, privileging Anglo-American scientific output. This introduces a strong Anglophone and science bias into rankings (Altbach, 2006, 2010).

(d) Neglect of teaching and academic freedom: Crucially, global rankings "*provide no guidance on the quality of teaching*" and ignore dimensions such as academic freedom or the learning environment. Kinzelbach et al. (2022) note that international rankings "*turn a blind eye to varying levels of academic freedom*" across countries, meaning a university in a restrictive environment faces no penalty in current ranking formulas. Similarly, measures of pedagogical innovation, student learning outcomes, or community engagement are largely absent from major rankings (Kinzelbach et al., 2022).

(e) Volatility and data integrity issues: Because methodologies assign arbitrary weights to different indicators, small data errors or changes can lead to significant rank swings. In their seminal analysis, Saisana, d'Hombres & Saltelli (2011) demonstrated that individual university ranks are often not statistically robust – minor methodological tweaks can reshuffle league tables dramatically. This calls into question the precision with which stakeholders interpret rank differences (e.g. being 50th vs. 100th). Despite this, the media and public often treat ranks as definitive (Saisana et al., 2011).

The net effect of these issues has been described as "*corrosive*" to academic values. Rankings have generated incentives for universities and governments that "*may improve standings in the rankings but do not necessarily enhance quality research and teaching*". For instance, Robinson (2013) argues that the proliferation of rankings has led to policy reforms and resource reallocations driven by the desire to climb league tables, rather than by academic mission needs. This dynamic encapsulates the ranking paradox: the tools meant to measure academic excellence are, in some cases, undermining the very qualities of academic life they purport to assess. As one analysis succinctly put it, the debate over rankings ultimately asks, "*whether higher education is to be thought of as having intrinsic value, or whether it is defined narrowly in instrumentalist and consumerist terms*". With this context, we now turn to specific areas of impact – research, teaching, governance, cultural contexts, and institutional autonomy – to examine how the drive for rankings interacts with academic freedom and autonomy (Robinson, 2013).

Rankings and Academic Freedom/ Autonomy: Conceptual Framework

Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are closely linked principles: autonomy in governance provides the environment for academic freedom to thrive. Autonomy can be understood as the degree of self-determination universities have in academic matters – "*literally…self-legislation, comprising self-determination, sovereignty, [and] self-governance*". Academic freedom refers to the freedom of faculty to teach, discuss, and research ideas without fear of external political or commercial pressure, and for students to learn and question orthodoxies. These principles have been codified in international statements and are seen as foundational to the mission of universities to pursue truth and serve society's long-term interests (Leiber et al., 2015).

Global rankings, as external evaluative systems, introduce new pressures that can conflict with or constrain these freedoms. When a university's leadership alters strategic priorities chiefly to satisfy ranking indicators, the institution's autonomous decision-making can give way to what some scholars call "managerial compliance" with external metrics. For example, if a university feels compelled to focus heavily on areas counted by rankings (like STEM research) at the expense of other intellectual pursuits (like the humanities or region-specific studies), this may narrow the de facto space of academic freedom for scholars in the de-emphasized fields. Likewise, national governments have increasingly used global rankings as a policy justification to reshape universities – through "excellence initiatives," targeted funding, or even mergers – potentially overriding institutional autonomy in the name of international competitiveness. In some cases, governments explicitly set goals like having a certain number of universities in the global top 100, tying institutional rewards or leadership evaluations to ranking results. Such external mandates can pressure universities to align their internal policies with ranking criteria, rather than their own mission or local needs.

It is important to note that not all institutions respond to rankings in the same way, and autonomy is a spectrum. Highly autonomous universities in strong democratic systems may have more leeway to resist or moderate ranking pressures. By contrast, institutions in centralized or resource-scarce systems might feel rankings are one of the few pathways to legitimacy and funding, making them more vulnerable to compromising academic values to improve rank. As this review will show, empirical studies from various regions illustrate these dynamics. The following sections delve into evidence of how ranking considerations are influencing research agendas, teaching practices, and administrative choices, along with regional perspectives on these phenomena. Throughout, we highlight implications for academic freedom

(e.g. the freedom to set research topics or curricula) and institutional autonomy (e.g. the ability to uphold a unique mission or govern without undue external dictates).

IMPACT ON RESEARCH PRIORITIES

One of the most documented impacts of rankings is the shift in university research priorities and behavior. Because global rankings heavily weight research productivity and citations, universities worldwide have felt pressure to boost measurable research output. **Almost all current rankings "overemphasize research output and citations as a proxy for 'quality' "**, as Robinson observes (Robinson, 2013). This has multiple consequences:

- Intensification of Research Output: Universities seeking to climb in rank often encourage faculty to increase publication quantity. In many environments, this has translated into policies and incentives that prioritize research volume (and visibility) over other faculty duties. For example, institutions might reduce teaching loads, provide bonuses for publications, or hire additional research-focused staff – all to raise the number of papers and citations affiliated with the university. Such strategies aim to directly improve ranking metrics (since indicators like publications, citation counts, and research income can together constitute 60% or more of a ranking score). However, an exclusive focus on quantity can undermine the quality and freedom of research. Faculty may feel compelled to choose research topics that are "safe" or trendy in order to publish quickly, rather than pursuing more innovative or locally relevant projects that might take longer to yield results. Studies have found that an emphasis on publishing in high-impact journals (often English-language) skews the type of research undertaken and narrows scholarly agendas. For instance, Snijder & Kingsley (2024) show that the need to publish in English for global visibility "*affects the type of research undertaken and further consolidates the Global North-centric view*" of scholarship. In other words, ranking pressures can channel researchers toward topics and approaches that align with dominant international trends (and journals) at the expense of diversity or local focus, potentially impinging on academic freedom in research choice (Moosa, 2018; Snijder & Kingsley, 2024).
- Bias Toward STEM and Quantitative Fields: Because citation-based metrics tend to favor fields with higher publication and citation rates (such as biomedicine, natural sciences, and engineering), universities may channel resources disproportionately into those fields. Large medical and science faculties can significantly boost a university's research profile in rankings. Altbach (2010)

pointed out that citation databases used in rankings mainly index English-language journals and especially reward output in the sciences, meaning "*English-speaking universities in the United States and United Kingdom*" and those with extensive science programs enjoy a built-in advantage. This creates an incentive for institutions to invest in labs, science hires, and research infrastructure in these areas – potentially at the cost of funding for humanities, social sciences, and arts. Indeed, case studies confirm this redistribution. In China, for example, the government's "World Class University" initiatives pushed top universities to emphasize science and technology fields. Song (2018), in an in-depth study of a Chinese research university, found that the humanities department at that university became "*disadvantaged*" in both internal resource allocation and external prestige during the world-class push. Interviews revealed that internal performance benchmarks (geared toward global indicators) did not favor humanities scholarship, leading to feelings of marginalization among those faculty. Such patterns raise concerns that academic freedom in less "rank-able" disciplines (like indigenous studies, local history, or critical theory) might be indirectly curtailed by lack of support, as universities concentrate on fields that yield quick ranking gains (Altbach, 2010; Robinson, 2013; Song, 2018).

- "Chasing Citations" and Research Metrics: The pressure to improve citation counts can distort research behavior. Some universities have engaged in aggressive tactics such as strategically recruiting highly cited researchers (even part-time or as honorary appointments) purely to boost citation indicators. A notorious example involved several universities in the Middle East "buying" the affiliation of prolific researchers to elevate their standings in the ARWU ranking, which counts the number of highly cited scientists. While this example is extreme and unethical – and has been met with corrective measures by ranking authorities - it underscores how the primacy of metrics can tempt institutions to prioritize numeric outcomes over genuine academic contributions. Even in more ordinary settings, faculty report increased administrative emphasis on h-indexes, journal impact factors, and other bibliometric measures in performance evaluations and hiring. This trend can narrow the definition of worthwhile research, pressuring academics to pursue mainstream topics likely to get published and cited, rather than exploratory or unconventional research. Over time, such metric-oriented environments risk creating what one scholar called a "*dysfunctional*" research culture that "potentially cause[s] more harm than good" in terms of intellectual innovation (Ansede, 2024; Kampmark, 2021; Moosa, 2018).
- Neglect of Locally Relevant Research: In universities of the Global South, leaders have voiced concern that chasing global rankings diverts attention

from research on local or regional issues. Since global rankings do not explicitly reward work on local community impact or national development (which may not result in international publications), academics might feel incentivized to shift focus away from pressing local challenges. For example, a medical researcher in an African university might choose to work on a trendy topic of global interest (publishable in Western journals) rather than on a neglected tropical disease prevalent in their region, if only the former will count toward the school's international reputation. Latin American university representatives have noted the "Anglo Saxon bias" of rankings and argued that their universities' "social mission" – such as extension programs in poor communities or applied research for local industry – is not captured in ranking metrics. This has led to calls for alternative evaluations that recognize regional engagement, but in the meantime, the global ranking race can make such research seem less valuable internally. The risk is a homogenization of research priorities globally, skewed toward what is countable and valued by ranking formulas rather than what might be most needed for specific societies or for the broader progress of knowledge (especially in areas not currently fashionable) (Bernasconi, 2012).

In sum, the influence of rankings on research is double-edged. On one positive note, some argue that rankings have pushed universities (especially in emerging economies) to strengthen research capacity and output. Where previously research was neglected, the spotlight of rankings has spurred investments in labs, doctoral training, and international collaboration, potentially boosting countries' research profiles. For instance, countries like China and Russia launched excellence programs partly to ascend in global rankings, which have indeed led to increased publications and some improved positions. However, these gains come with the aforementioned caveats: an overly narrow definition of research excellence and possible infringements on the freedom and diversity of inquiry. As Marginson & van der Wende (2007) caution, "global comparisons are possible only in relation to one model of institution – that of the comprehensive, research-intensive university, tailored to science-strong and English-speaking universities". Institutions and scholars operating outside that model (whether by disciplinary focus, language, or mission) find themselves under pressure to adapt if they wish to compete in rankings, potentially at the expense of their original mandates (Guo et al., 2023; Hazelkorn, 2013; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007; Song, 2018).

IMPACT ON CURRICULUM AND TEACHING PRACTICES

If research has been elevated by the ranking agenda, teaching and learning have often been comparatively de-prioritized. Many scholars characterize teaching as the "hidden victim" of the global ranking race. Raazia Moosa (2018) uses the metaphor of teaching and learning becoming the "*Cinderella function*" – relegated to lower status – in universities where research prestige dominates. The tension between research and teaching is long-standing, but rankings have exacerbated it by signaling that only research outputs and reputational prestige count toward excellence (Moosa, 2018).

Key impacts on curriculum and teaching include:

- Diminished Emphasis on Teaching Quality: Since global rankings omit direct measures of teaching quality (student learning outcomes, teaching effectiveness, etc.), institutions focused on climbing the rankings may neglect improvements in pedagogy or curriculum innovation. In some research-intensive universities, faculty promotions and rewards tilt heavily toward research accomplishments, sending a message that teaching excellence is secondary. Moosa's analysis of South African higher education notes that as universities chase ranking-related prestige, "*excellent teachers*" receive "*lower prestige*" compared to "excellent researchers," contributing to "*a decline in the attention given to teaching*". This is supported by Lindsay (2012) who observed that institutions emphasizing publications and prestige saw teaching taking a backseat. The practical effects can include larger class sizes (as faculty time is allocated more to research), fewer resources for teaching development, and the proliferation of temporary or adjunct instructors handling undergraduate courses while star professors focus on research. Students may experience less faculty engagement or outdated curricula if instructors have little incentive (or time) to update teaching methods. Over time, this dynamic threatens academic freedom in teaching – the freedom to give adequate attention and creativity to pedagogy – because faculty feel pressured to prioritize research tasks that are visible to rankings over investment in their teaching role (Lindsay, 2012; Moosa, 2018).
- Curricular Standardization and Narrowing: Another subtle impact is that universities may adjust their curricula and academic offerings in pursuit of ranking-related objectives. For instance, to improve "*student selectivity*" or outcomes metrics (present in some national rankings and indirectly affecting reputation), universities might tighten admissions or alter programs to attract top students, potentially reducing access for non-traditional or local students. While global rankings themselves do not typically measure admission se-

lectivity or specific curricular content, the general push toward a "world-class" profile often involves aligning programs with international norms. In non-English-speaking countries, this has meant introducing more programs taught in English to draw international faculty and students (since metrics like internationalization count in QS/THE). While internationalization can enrich the campus, if done purely for rankings it may sideline local languages or contexts in the curriculum. For example, some universities in Asia and continental Europe now offer duplicate degree programs in English and de-emphasize courses in the local language, aiming to improve global visibility. Critics argue this can undermine academic freedom by pressuring faculty to teach in a second language or to adjust content to suit an international audience rather than local needs. There is also a trend of emphasizing disciplines that score well in rankings (mostly sciences and globally recognized fields) and cutting or under-resourcing courses with local or regional focus. Latin American commentators have noted that rankings' neglect of the "social mission" of universities – such as community education or region-specific studies – leads to those areas being under-valued in the curriculum (Bernasconi, 2012).

- Pressure on Academic Programs and Offerings: University administrators, mindful of rankings, sometimes make strategic academic decisions that can affect curricula. For example, some institutions have launched new research-oriented graduate programs (master's and PhDs) to boost research output and attract talent, possibly at the expense of undergraduate program investment. Others have considered closing or merging small departments (often in humanities or arts) that they perceive as not contributing enough to rankings or reputation. Such decisions impinge on institutional autonomy over the curriculum by using an external metric as justification for internal restructuring. They may also restrict the breadth of knowledge fields cultivated at the university, limiting the academic freedom to teach and study in certain disciplines. Hazelkorn (2014) observed that global rankings encourage a homogenization where universities worldwide feel compelled to offer similar portfolios of "prestigious" subjects and phase out niche or locally oriented courses that do not enhance ranked performance. This can lead to curriculum convergence – a loss of diversity in higher education ecosystems as institutions emulate a common model of the research-university curriculum (Hazelkorn, 2013, 2014).
- Faculty Role Strain: From the faculty perspective, the ranking-driven culture can create role conflict. Professors are expected to excel in both research and teaching, but if institutional rewards skew toward research (as is often the case for ranking pursuits), teaching effort may be quietly deprioritized.

O'Meara & Bloomgarden (2011), studying a liberal arts college in the U.S., found that during periods of intense striving for prestige (such as trying to rise in U.S. News rankings), faculty sensed that "*pressures associated with striving intensely [for prestige] place work roles in conflict*" – with research demands often crowding out time and energy for teaching. Some faculty adapted by reducing mentoring or reusing lecture materials rather than developing new pedagogies, which can diminish the quality of education. Additionally, younger academics may internalize the idea that focusing on teaching is a career risk if only research productivity is rewarded, thus self-censoring the amount of effort they invest in pedagogical innovation. This represents an erosion of the spirit of academic freedom in teaching, as the freedom to prioritize excellent teaching is indirectly constrained by the institutional climate (O'Meara & Bloomgarden, 2011).

- Student Experience and Learning: While less studied quantitatively (due to difficulty of measurement), there are concerns that an excessive focus on rank metrics can harm the student academic experience. For example, if faculty hiring is driven more by research records than teaching ability, students might encounter brilliant researchers who are poor teachers more often. If institutional funds are poured into research labs and global marketing while undergraduate facilities or teaching support languish, students feel the impact in outdated labs or large lectures. A broad education that fosters critical thinking – a key outcome of academic freedom in the classroom – might give way to a narrower training aimed at producing metrics (like test scores or publications with student co-authors). In short, the incentives created by rankings often do not align with investments in teaching quality, and without corrective measures this misalignment can lead to a degradation of the educational mission (Morphew & Swanson, 2011; Shin et al., 2011).

It is important to acknowledge that some institutions have worked to counterbalance these trends. A number of universities have launched teaching excellence frameworks, centers for teaching and learning, or parallel reward systems for teaching achievement in order not to lose focus on their educational mission. Moreover, alternative rankings or evaluations (for instance, U-Multirank, an EU-supported project) include teaching and learning as key dimensions, potentially encouraging a more holistic. Still, the dominant global rankings by design emphasize research outcomes, and as long as those remain the coin of prestige, the risk is that teaching continues to play second fiddle. As Moosa concludes, "*global ranking systems thus have the agency either to perpetuate teaching and learning as the Cinderella function in HE…or to [encourage focus] on all the core functions of universities*". To protect academic freedom in teaching, many scholars argue that universities

must consciously resist the neglect of teaching when strategizing for rankings, and that ranking bodies themselves should broaden their criteria to include measures of teaching quality and student development (Moosa, 2018; Usher, 2014).

IMPACT ON ADMINISTRATIVE DECISION-MAKING

Global rankings have increasingly become a factor – sometimes a dominant one – in university strategic planning and administration. University leaders and managers monitor rankings closely, and many have integrated ranking targets into their institutional goals. This permeation of rankings into governance can directly affect institutional autonomy, as decisions may be driven by external ranking criteria rather than internal priorities. Several facets of administrative decision-making are affected:

- Strategic Plans and Resource Allocation: It is now common for universities to reference ranking aspirations in their strategic vision documents (e.g., aiming to be "top 100 by 2030"). While on the surface this may be a harmless benchmark, it can significantly skew resource allocation. Leiber (2017) notes that governing bodies often use rankings "to determine policies to achieve excellence", effectively using rank standings as key performance indicators. This might manifest in budgets being reallocated toward units that can drive up ranking metrics. For instance, a university might concentrate funds on its research office, libraries, and STEM colleges (to produce more output), while cutting back on expenditures not measured by rankings (such as student services or community outreach). Capital projects like new laboratories or prestigious research centers might get priority over classroom upgrades if the former are seen as improving reputation and research yield. Such shifts can undermine a university's autonomy in balancing its multiple roles (education, research, service), refocusing it narrowly on what rankings reward. At the system level, Marginson (2014) observed that rankings have contributed to greater stratification – policymakers channeling funding to a select few "flagship" universities to boost their international rankings, often at the expense of equitable development across the sector. This "picking winners" approach can be a top-down imposition that limits the autonomy of less favored institutions and potentially redirects their missions (Leiber, 2017; Marginson, 2014).
- Leadership and Management Practices: University presidents and top administrators are acutely aware of their institution's ranking and can feel pressure from trustees, government officials, or the media to improve it. This external

pressure can translate into internal management by metrics. Some administrators establish dedicated offices or task forces for ranking improvement, collecting data on ranking indicators and benchmarking against competitors. The presence of such structures means that managerial attention and decisions routinely factor in "how will this affect our ranking?" There are documented cases of leadership decisions – such as international partnerships, hiring a star scientist, or initiating a new program – being justified primarily in terms of expected ranking benefits. Morphew & Swanson (2011) found that universities often use rankings as "a communicative tool" to assure stakeholders of progress, indicating that management decisions might be oriented toward sending signals that will be recognized by ranking organizations or external evaluators. In extreme instances, this can lead to ethically questionable decisions (such as the earlier mentioned hiring of highly cited researchers on a superficial basis, or encouraging tactics to inflate metrics). Even when not unethical, a management culture fixated on rankings may adopt a corporate style of governance that prioritizes measurable outputs, potentially sidelining faculty input or the collegial processes that typically govern academic decisions – a subtle threat to shared governance and thus institutional autonomy in decision-making (Grewal et al., 2008; Morphew & Swanson, 2011).

- Faculty Hiring, Promotion, and Workload Decisions: Perhaps the most immediate administrative impact of rankings is on personnel policies. To improve faculty credentials and research output (key ranking components), universities might raise the bar for hiring new faculty (e.g., requiring a strong research record for all positions, even those primarily teaching-oriented). In many places, hiring has shifted to favor candidates with degrees from highly ranked institutions or with numerous publications, on the assumption that this will bolster the hiring university's prestige and output. While meritocratic in appearance, this can disadvantage scholars who took alternative career paths or who focus on teaching. Evidence from striving universities shows increased use of publication counts and citation metrics in promotion and tenure reviews. Faculty who devote time to unmeasured activities (mentoring, curriculum design, public scholarship) may find those efforts discounted, indirectly pressuring them to conform to the metric-focused definition of success. Additionally, workloads may be adjusted: for example, productive researchers might get reduced teaching (to publish more), shifting more teaching onto other faculty or adjuncts. This administrative calculus, driven by the aim of boosting outputs for rankings, can erode the autonomy of departments to allocate duties according to pedagogical needs or individual strengths. It can also chill academic freedom if, for instance, junior faculty feel they must

steer away from controversial or long-gestating research because only quick publication wins will count for promotion.

- Institutional Identity and Mission Drift: Administrators are the custodians of a university's mission. However, as rankings reinforce a singular image of what a "world-class" university should be, many institutions feel compelled to emulate that template, sometimes at odds with their original mission. O'Meara (2007) calls this "*institutional striving*", and notes it can lead to mission drift where "*universities prioritize ranking metrics over their core objectives*". For instance, a teaching-focused college might expand graduate programs and research labs to gain prestige, thereby shifting away from its prior commitment to undergraduate education. Such changes are typically driven by top management and governing boards who wish to elevate the institution's profile. In the process, the traditional autonomy of an institution to define its unique mission may be subsumed under a homogenizing goal of ranking excellence. Faculty at one liberal arts college (in O'Meara's study) perceived an "*identity crisis*" when their college started benchmarking itself obsessively against Ivy League universities, constantly comparing resources and reputation. One faculty member lamented that the college spent "*time comparing itself to somebody else… We've developed a mindset of being second best*", losing sight of its own strengths. This illustrates how administrative focus on rankings can alter the academic culture and self-conception of an institution (Meara, 2007; Nguyen et al., 2025; O'Meara & Bloomgarden, 2011).
- Not All Administrations Equally Swayed: It is worth noting that some research finds a nuanced picture – not every university administration reacts the same way to rankings. In a study of six German universities, Leiber (2017) found a "very limited role of rankings in integrative university governance," concluding that while rankings were monitored, they did not fundamentally drive internal governance decisions in those cases. Factors like strong academic self-governance, institutional traditions, or skepticism of rankings can buffer an administration's response. In such environments, leaders might use rankings as one data point among many, or as a PR tool, but still prioritize internal quality processes and values over chasing rank positions. This suggests that maintaining institutional autonomy in the face of rankings is possible – largely depending on leadership philosophy and stakeholder pressure. However, globally, the trend has been toward more administrators openly embracing ranking-oriented management. The creation of roles like Vice Presidents or Directors for Global Rankings at some universities exemplifies how governance is being explicitly structured around ranking outcomes (Leiber, 2017; Leiber et al., 2015).

One vivid illustration of administrative obsession comes from the earlier-mentioned liberal arts college: a professor quipped that "our director of public relations would have gladly shot off one toe on each foot for every point she could have moved us up in those rankings…we were incredibly image conscious". While said tongue-in-cheek, such anecdotes reveal the intensity with which some administrators pursue ranking recognition, sometimes placing image above substance. The implication for academic freedom is that administrative decisions might constrain the space for critical inquiry if, for example, areas of study that are controversial or unlikely to produce immediate prestige are discouraged. It could also mean less tolerance for internal dissent; if maintaining a pristine image is paramount, university management might be less inclined to tolerate outspoken faculty or students whose activities (though protected by academic freedom) might "rock the boat." There is evidence in some countries that universities have clamped down on campus protests or sensitive research to avoid negative publicity that could tarnish their reputation for rankings. These are troubling signs that rankings, indirectly, may incentivize a more controlled and top-down management style, potentially stifling the open intellectual climate that academic freedom requires.

In summary, the influence of rankings on administration intersects significantly with institutional autonomy. A university's freedom to chart its own course can be compromised if external rankings become the compass for decision-making. The challenge for academic leaders is to manage the external expectations and competitive pressures without allowing them to override the institution's academic values and purpose. Some have likened this to "herding cats" – balancing quantifiable targets with the less tangible, but crucial, elements of academic excellence. The next section will examine how these dynamics play out differently across regions and cultures, as universities in various parts of the world navigate the ranking game with different constraints and motivations.

CULTURAL AND REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The impact of rankings on academic freedom and autonomy is not uniform worldwide; it varies with cultural, political, and economic context. Universities in the Global North (North America, Europe, developed Asia-Pacific) often have long-standing traditions of academic freedom and substantial resources, whereas institutions in the Global South or emerging economies may operate under tighter state control or resource constraints. These differences mediate how rankings are perceived and acted upon:

- Established vs. Emerging Institutions: Many of the highest-ranked universities are elite institutions in Western countries with strong research orientation and autonomy. For them, rankings often validate an existing model; they may feel pressure to retain their positions but have the means to do so (through large endowments, government grants, etc.). In contrast, emerging institutions see rankings as an opportunity to gain global recognition and catch up. China is a prime example: its government explicitly tied international competitiveness to rankings, launching programs (985, 211, "Double First Class") that poured billions into selected universities to become world-class. The result has been a rapid rise of Chinese universities in global rankings. However, this came with heavy top-down intervention – merging departments, recruiting overseas PhDs, mandating publication targets – which has stirred internal tensions. Song's case study of a Chinese university highlighted "top-down actions at elite universities" that led to conflict among stakeholders and even the suspension of a drastic personnel reform due to pushback. This illustrates a pattern in some countries: to achieve ranking ambitions, governments may infringe on university autonomy, enforcing changes that faculty might not organically support. Academic freedom can also suffer under such regimes; for instance, Chinese universities have achieved higher ranks mainly in STEM fields while more politically sensitive fields (law, social sciences) remain constrained – a divergence enabled by the fact that rankings do not penalize limitations on academic discourse. Thus, a university can climb in rank even as academic freedom in certain domains is restricted. This disconnect is noted by Kinzelbach et al., who point out that none of the big three rankings account for academic freedom, allowing countries with repressive environments to "climb up the ladder" without addressing those issues (Kinzelbach et al., 2022; Li & Xue, 2021; Liu et al., 2023; Song, 2018).
- Global South Challenges: Universities in the Global South (e.g., parts of Africa, Latin America, South Asia) face particular challenges with global rankings. These rankings tend to privilege characteristics more common in wealthier systems – extensive research funding, high faculty-student ratios, large numbers of PhD students, and strong international networks. Many African and Latin American universities are oriented toward teaching and local service, with relatively less research output in indexed journals, in part due to pressing local educational needs and limited funding for research. As a result, they are often ranked lower, which can create a perception (domestically and internationally) that they are "inferior" institutions. This has spurred a sense of injustice and debate in those regions. For example, a consortium of Latin American universities and UNESCO met in 2012 to criticize global rankings for "*invalid measurements of quality*" and "*Anglo-Saxon*

bias," arguing that Latin American universities fulfill a social mission not captured by current metrics. One outcome is that some countries or regions have considered developing alternative rankings or evaluation systems that include criteria like community impact or teaching – aligning with their values. Nonetheless, the global rankings carry cachet, and many universities in developing countries have begun to adapt to their criteria anyway. This adaptation can strain academic freedom and autonomy: for instance, scholars may be pushed to publish in international journals (often English-medium) rather than local journals or in languages spoken by the community, potentially limiting the accessibility and relevance of their work locally. The dominance of English as the language of global science can marginalize research on local issues or in local languages, a phenomenon observed as decreasing "bibliodiversity" in publishing. For African universities, pursuing ranking metrics might divert scarce resources from undergraduate expansion or vocational training (key needs in their context) toward a narrower research agenda. Policymakers in some African countries have explicitly stated that while global rankings are noted, they cannot be the main driver, given that expanding access and addressing socio-economic development are higher priorities. This highlights a cultural difference: in some Global South contexts, there is normative resistance to letting rankings dictate too much, as doing so could compromise the institution's role in society. The paradox is that ignoring rankings altogether carries its own risks (e.g., missing out on international prestige that can attract talent and funding) (Bernasconi, 2012; Snijder & Kingsley, 2024).

- Authoritarian vs. Democratic Contexts: The relationship between rankings and academic freedom is also mediated by political context. In more authoritarian countries, governments might use university rankings as a nationalist success symbol while simultaneously constraining academic freedom. Because rankings can be achieved through heavy investment and top-down mobilization, a state can demonstrate "world-class" status without loosening political controls on campus. For example, some universities in the Middle East have climbed in rankings through investment and recruitment, even though academic freedom (freedom to criticize government or discuss sensitive topics) is limited. Conversely, in highly democratic contexts (e.g., Scandinavia), academic freedom is robust, but universities may rank modestly due to different priorities (like open access education, which can reduce resources per student, etc.). There is a concern that global rankings create a one-size-fits-all competition that doesn't account for these context differences, implicitly pressuring freer systems to adopt more centralized, performance-driven policies. A recent Academic Freedom Index report warned that "*these*

rankings turn a blind eye" to academic freedom and thus fail to warn users when high ranks coincide with declines in freedom. An implication is that students or scholars might be lured to a high-ranked university in a country where they later face censorship or surveillance – a misalignment of expectations fostered by the ranking's omission of that dimension.

- Regional Initiatives and Resistance: Different regions have responded in various ways. The European Union, for instance, funded U-Multirank to provide a multidimensional ranking that would reduce the focus on a single league table and allow institutions to be compared on aspects like teaching quality, regional engagement, and internationalization specifically. This was partly motivated by a view that European higher education, with its diversity of institution types (research universities, applied sciences universities, etc.), needed a fairer comparative tool than global rankings which heavily favor the research university model. While U-Multirank has not achieved the public notoriety of QS/THE, it represents an attempt to reclaim some autonomy in defining evaluation criteria that matter to Europe. In Latin America, countries like Chile, Brazil, and Mexico have debated their own ranking systems or quality assurance frameworks that include local context measures (e.g., equity, contribution to social mobility). The African Union and NGOs have also discussed developing an African ranking or rating that might include measures of capacity building and societal impact. These efforts reflect a cultural assertion of values: a desire to ensure that universities are not simply contorting themselves to fit an external mold but are judged (and funded) on terms that align with regional development needs and academic values (Daraio et al., 2015).
- Brain Drain and Autonomy: Another regional implication relates to mobility. Highly ranked universities (mostly in the global north) attract students and faculty from around the world, sometimes contributing to brain drain from developing regions. When top local talent moves to a higher-ranked institution abroad for better facilities or prestige, the home country's universities lose human capital, which can further depress their performance and autonomy. This dynamic can pressure governments in developing countries to focus even more on rankings as a way to keep up or entice their diaspora back. However, chasing rankings without the underlying ecosystem (academic freedom, funding stability, etc.) may not be sustainable and could lead to disillusionment. There are cases where massive infusions of money did not immediately translate into expected ranking jumps, leading to questions about effectiveness (e.g., some Gulf region universities). Such experiences underscore that academic freedom and a vibrant intellectual culture – which

develop over time – are critical to genuine academic excellence, and these cannot simply be purchased or mandated from above in the short term.

In summary, cultural and regional contexts shape how rankings interact with academic freedom and autonomy. In some contexts, rankings have served as a modernizing force, pushing institutions and governments to adopt global best practices and strive for higher standards. But in others, they are seen as a neo-imperial benchmark that doesn't respect different educational missions or contexts, potentially undermining local autonomy and priorities. A nuanced view must recognize that a "one-size-fits-all" approach to evaluating universities is problematic. The challenge, raised by scholars like Bernasconi (2012), is to acknowledge "universities in this part of the world are different" and that evaluation systems should reflect the varied "social missions" and constraints present in Latin America, Africa, Asia, etc. Only then can academic freedom and institutional autonomy be preserved globally while still engaging in meaningful comparisons and accountability. This tension between global benchmarking and local values is at the heart of ongoing debates on the future of rankings (Bernasconi, 2012).

STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AND INSTITUTIONAL IDENTITY

Perhaps the most profound long-term impact of global rankings is on universities' strategic autonomy – their ability to set independent long-range goals – and on their institutional identity or character. The pursuit of rankings can lead to what might be called a "convergence syndrome," where universities become more similar to each other in structure and priorities, potentially diluting the diversity of higher education models and the distinct missions that institutions historically embraced. Key issues include:

- Homogenization of Institutional Missions: Global rankings implicitly promote a model of the university that is research-intensive, comprehensive in subject offerings, and oriented toward global recognition. As a result, universities worldwide feel pressure to conform to this template. Marginson (2007) warned that through rankings, universities are "*becoming similar and conforming to a single hierarchy*". The hierarchy in question places the multi-faculty research university at the apex. This has led to mission drift, particularly among institutions that used to have specialized or teaching-focused missions. For example, polytechnic institutes or liberal arts colleges have sought university status and expanded research to gain prestige, a trend observed in Europe, Asia, and North America. Jaquette (2013) documented

how dozens of U.S. colleges changed their names and missions to become "universities" in pursuit of prestige (often measured by rankings or classification). While growth and change can be positive, doing so primarily to improve rankings rather than to serve a new educational purpose may lead to mismatches between institutional strengths and goals. The identity of institutions – whether as community-serving colleges, elite research hubs, faith-based universities, etc. – gets blurred as everyone races toward a similar set of indicators. This erodes the autonomy of universities to define success on their own terms. An institution that might otherwise prioritize, say, undergraduate teaching excellence or regional development might pivot to emulate a top-ranked university's focus on research output and internationalization, even if that doesn't best serve its community or stakeholders (Jaquette, 2013; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007).

- Erosion of Unique Traditions and Values: Many universities have distinctive traditions and ethos. For instance, some might emphasize academic freedom and critical inquiry as part of their identity (even if it means accommodating dissent and controversy), others might have religious or cultural missions that shape their curricula and priorities. The rank-centric mindset tends to privilege a narrower set of values – primarily quantitative excellence and external validation. University leaders under ranking pressure might downplay aspects of their identity that do not directly contribute to rankings. For example, a university with a strong tradition of shared governance and faculty autonomy might streamline decision-making to be more top-down to respond faster to rankings, thereby weakening a long-held governance value. Or a university rooted in social justice education might find those activities underfunded if they don't help rankings. In some countries, there is fear that the global ranking race is leading to "academic capitalism" – a view of higher education as an enterprise competing for status, which could sideline the collegial, reflective aspects of academia. Moosa (2018) notes that some universities "have adopted a business model…and begun to view…higher education as a business" to cope with globalization and improve rankings. This can manifest in treating students as customers, education as a product, and faculty as human resources – an identity shift that may conflict with academic freedom if, for instance, scholarly pursuits that are not immediately profitable or reputation-enhancing are discouraged (Moosa, 2018; Rust & Kim, 2016).
- Impacts on Autonomy through Policy and Funding: Strategic autonomy is also affected by external stakeholders. Governments and funding bodies, influenced by rankings, may impose strategic directions on universities. For instance, a government might mandate that a university focus on certain "priority" research areas that align with rankings or national prestige goals. This

diminishes the university's autonomy to chart its course based on local needs or its faculty's interests. A current example is how some governments tie funding or special designations to ranking criteria – e.g., providing bonus funds for each rise in ranking or threatening budget cuts if a university slips. Such policies effectively make institutional strategy reactive to rankings. Instead of a university asking "what academic goals do we want to achieve in the next decade," it starts asking "what will it take to reach top 100 in five years?" The difference is subtle but important: the latter question cedes strategic control to the logic of rankings. Rauhvargers (2011) observed that universities have been "*unable to avoid national and international comparisons, and this has caused changes in the way universities function*". Those changes often mean aligning internal strategies with external benchmarks. A positive interpretation is that this drives efficiency and global orientation; a negative interpretation is that universities become less self-determining and more like contestants in a global competition defined by others (Rauhvargers, 2011).

- Academic Freedom in Governance: Institutional identity is also about governance philosophy. A key aspect of academic freedom is the degree to which faculty have a voice in academic decisions (curriculum, research directions) and the extent to which universities can safeguard dissent and unconventional thinking. A ranking-driven identity may put a premium on output metrics, possibly fostering a culture of compliance and performance management that could stifle the free debate and risk-taking that academic freedom thrives on. For example, if a department's value is judged mainly by its publication and citation counts, faculty members might feel less free to pursue a risky new line of inquiry or to devote time to unfunded research questions, fearing it could hurt their unit's metrics. The "*code of conduct*" mindset mentioned in one critique making everyone "compliant" and not "rocking the boat" – is anathema to the spirit of free academic exploration. Yet, if a university's strategic identity becomes one of a top-ranked achiever above all, there may be implicit pressure on faculty and students to not engage in activities that might generate controversy or distract from the climb. This could include less tolerance for outspoken critique (e.g., of university policies or government sponsors) or for fields of study that don't yield quick returns.
- Maintaining Identity and Autonomy: Not all is lost; many universities consciously strive to maintain their character even as they engage with rankings. Some institutions have exploited rankings in a way that aligns with their identity – for instance, highlighting aspects where they excel that also happen to be measured (like employer reputation or international outlook) and letting other aspects be secondary. The challenge is finding a balance. A world-renowned liberal arts college may never be in the top 50 of ARWU (since

ARWU is biased to big research universities), but it might top teaching-focused rankings or earn acclaim in qualitative evaluations. If such an institution stays true to its identity, it retains autonomy by defining success in multiple ways, not solely by global rank. There is also a movement among some universities to form networks (like the Talloires Network for socially responsible universities) to uphold and share values beyond rankings, thereby collectively resisting homogenization.

Ultimately, strategic autonomy and institutional identity boil down to the question: To whom and what does a university answer? If the answer becomes "to global rankings above all," then the university risks becoming an instrument of external validation rather than an autonomous social institution. This has profound implications for academic freedom – for if universities cannot set their own direction based on academic judgment, the freedom of scholars within them is on shakier ground. On the other hand, if a university asserts an identity – say, "*we are a regional teaching university dedicated to first-generation college students*" – it may deliberately opt out of the rankings rat race, focusing on its autonomous mission. However, that path requires conviction and often courage, as external stakeholders might question the institution's quality without the shorthand of rankings as proof.

In conclusion of this section, the influence of rankings has nudged many institutions toward a convergent notion of success, challenging the sector's pluralism. The costs are a potential loss of autonomy and unique identity, which in turn can diminish the richness of academic environments and the freedom to pursue varied forms of scholarship. The subsequent recommendations will address how different actors can help restore or protect a healthier balance, ensuring that universities can achieve excellence defined not just by rankings, but by their contribution to knowledge, their students, and society – in line with their own missions and values.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing the tension between rankings and academic freedom/institutional autonomy requires concerted action by universities themselves, ranking organizations, and policymakers. Below are actionable recommendations for each:

For Universities:

- Reaffirm Mission and Values: Universities should begin by clearly articulating their core academic values and mission, and use these as the compass for decision-making. Strategic plans can acknowledge rankings but subordinate them to the institution's mission. For example, if a university's mission

is to provide accessible quality education or to drive regional development, let those goals take precedence, with rankings as a secondary consideration. This stance should be communicated to internal stakeholders, so there is a shared understanding that not all that counts is in the rankings. Many successful universities (including some highly ranked ones) have openly stated that they pursue "excellence on our own terms" rather than chasing every metric – this helps align the campus culture with intrinsic values rather than league tables.

- Adopt a Holistic Internal Evaluation: Develop internal KPIs and evaluation systems that balance research metrics with measures of teaching quality, student learning, and societal impact. By internally rewarding and recognizing excellence in teaching and community engagement, universities send a message that those activities are valued even if rankings ignore them. For instance, create prestigious internal awards for teaching innovation, or include student satisfaction and graduate outcomes in departmental reviews. This can counteract the skewing effect of external metrics. As one analysis suggested, "if rankings won't focus on all core functions, universities must do so themselves". A holistic approach ensures academic freedom by allowing faculty to excel and be recognized in multiple dimensions, not just publications (Moosa, 2018).
- Responsible Data Management and Goal-Setting: Where universities do aim to improve on ranking indicators, they should do so ethically and in ways that enhance real quality. Set modest, achievable targets (e.g., increase PhD enrollment by X% or improve citation impact by Y) that align with genuine capacity-building. Avoid any temptation of data manipulation or superficial fixes – not only are these unethical, but they risk reputational damage if exposed. Instead, focus on strategies like faculty development for stronger research (which improves output legitimately) or international collaborations that enrich scholarship. This approach treats ranking improvement as a by-product of quality improvement, not an end in itself (Hazelkorn, 2009b).
- Protect Academic Freedom in Policies: University leadership should explicitly protect academic freedom and shared governance during strategic changes. For instance, involve faculty senates in discussions about responding to rankings, to ensure policies don't infringe on academic matters. If there is pressure to close a department due to low ranking performance, require a rigorous academic review rather than a pure metrics decision. Also, incorporate academic freedom metrics internally – for example, regularly assess faculty's ability to teach/research freely (through surveys or external audits) and address issues. A university could even publish its own "academic freedom report" alongside other performance indicators, signaling its importance. This

aligns with proposals to include academic freedom in evaluations. A culture of openness – where criticism of university policies (even ranking strategies) is allowed – will ensure decisions are debated and refined, preserving autonomy and freedom (Kinzelbach et al., 2022).

- Use Networks and Collaboration: Universities, especially those in the Global South or with less global visibility, can band together to create strength in numbers. Consortiums or alliances can share best practices for balancing rankings and academic values. They can also collectively engage with ranking agencies to advocate for changes (e.g., more weight on teaching or a metric for freedom – see below for rankers). By presenting a united front, universities have more influence. Additionally, partnerships between high-ranked and lower-ranked institutions (for research, exchange, capacity building) can mitigate brain drain and create a more leveled field of development, reducing the harsh competitive zero-sum mindset. For instance, a top-50 university partnering with an emerging university on research projects can help the latter improve without compromising its identity (Kehm, 2014).

For Ranking Organizations (QS, THE, ARWU, etc.):

- Broaden and Refine Metrics: It is incumbent on ranking bodies to continually improve their methodologies to address known biases and gaps. A key recommendation is to incorporate metrics that reflect teaching quality and academic freedom. While measuring teaching quality globally is challenging, proxies like student-to-staff ratios, graduation rates, or student engagement surveys can be included (some rankings like THE have started using teaching reputation surveys and staff ratios). More boldly, ranking groups could partner with efforts like the Academic Freedom Index to introduce an academic freedom adjustment or indicator. Given evidence that "none of the three most consulted rankings makes mention" of academic freedom, introducing such a measure would be a groundbreaking improvement aligning rankings with core academic values. At minimum, rankings should ensure their indicators do no harm: for example, reducing the weight on sheer volume metrics that encourage salami-slicing of research, and increasing weight on impact or quality measures.
- Transparency and Clarity: Rankings should be transparent about their methodologies and limitations. Clear disclosure of how scores are calculated, what the confidence intervals are, and caution against over-interpretation of small differences would help stakeholders use rankings more responsibly. Some rankings already provide methodological reports; these should be made easily accessible and digestible to university leaders and the public.

For instance, Saisana et al. (2011) demonstrated that ranks are not absolute; ranking agencies could publish stability analyses (showing how sensitive ranks are to changes), which might discourage obsession with tiny moves. By educating users that rankings are "simplistic snapshots" and have margins of error, rankers can reduce undue pressure on institutions (Saisana et al., 2011).

- Multi-dimensional Ranking Tools: Following the example of U-Multirank, the major rankers could offer customizable rankings or sub-rankings that allow different types of institutions to shine. For instance, create a global teaching excellence ranking, or a regional engagement ranking, separate from the main research-heavy ranking. This doesn't mean abandoning the flagship ranking, but providing alternative perspectives. U-Multirank's user-driven approach – letting users weight dimensions themselves – could be emulated by QS or THE on their websites, giving stakeholders the ability to sort schools based on criteria they value (like if a student cares more about teaching than research, see which universities lead in teaching-related indicators). This would implicitly validate multiple definitions of excellence and relieve the pressure to chase one-size-fits-all standings.
- Prevent Gaming and Unethical Practices: Ranking organizations should stay vigilant about detecting and deterring manipulation. The case of artificially inflated highly cited researchers in Saudi universities, once exposed, led to methodology adjustments. Rankers must continue to refine data auditing – e.g., flagging irregular citation patterns, scrutinizing sudden spikes in particular metrics – and penalize or correct for gaming. A published code of conduct for ranked institutions, possibly developed by the IREG Observatory (International Ranking Expert Group), could set norms (e.g., discouraging hiring purely for affiliations, or misreporting data) and rankers could exclude or publicly flag institutions that violate them. This helps maintain the integrity of rankings so that universities focus on genuine improvement rather than shortcuts.
- Engage the Academic Community: Ranking bodies can form advisory councils with representatives from universities (across regions and types) to get feedback on their methodologies and changes. In recent years, rankers like THE have shown willingness to consult on new metrics (for example, considering how to measure societal impact or innovation). By incorporating input from academia, they can ensure the evolution of rankings aligns better with what universities value. Moreover, rankers should research and publish on the effects of their rankings (some have started doing impact reports). A self-reflective approach – recognizing that rankings influence behavior – comes with a responsibility to guide that influence positively. For example, if they

know that something like patent counts can cause universities to file lots of trivial patents, maybe that metric should be weighed lightly or contextualized.

For Policymakers and Funding Bodies:

- Use Rankings Judiciously in Policy: Governments should resist the impulse to use global rankings as the sole or primary basis for funding decisions or policy judgments about universities. While rankings can provide some benchmarking insight, over-reliance is dangerous. Policymakers should develop more nuanced national quality assurance systems that consider local context and a broader set of criteria. Funding formulas can include metrics for teaching quality, inclusion, and knowledge transfer alongside research – this way universities have multiple incentives, not just those aligned with rankings. If a government does have an "excellence initiative" tied to rankings, it should also provide support for the rest of the system to avoid excessive stratification and ensure that basic academic freedom and autonomy are upheld in all institutions, not just the elite few.
- Protect Institutional Autonomy in Law and Practice: Legal frameworks for higher education should enshrine autonomy and academic freedom, so that universities have the space to make academic decisions without political interference, even under the pretext of improving performance. Policymakers must avoid micromanaging universities in a way that violates these principles. For example, setting a broad goal to improve research is fine, but dictating which departments to close or which faculty to hire is infringing on autonomy. Countries that have granted universities more autonomy often see better outcomes in innovation and quality. Thus, even in the pursuit of world-class status, respecting the "arm's length" relationship is crucial. A practical step is establishing independent higher education councils or boards that buffer political pressures and make decisions based on academic merit (Ritzen, 2016).
- Encourage Diverse Institutional Roles: Policymakers should recognize and reinforce the diversity of the higher education ecosystem. Not every institution should aim to be a research-intensive university; different tiers and types can serve different needs. For instance, fund and celebrate teaching universities or community colleges for their role in access and workforce development, separate from research universities. Create excellence awards or centers of excellence for teaching and community engagement, not only for research. By doing so, the government sends a message that success is multidimensional, reducing the singular focus on global rankings. This in turn gives institutions the confidence and autonomy to excel in their niche.

Germany's approach of Universities of Applied Sciences is a case where a separate identity with its own prestige exists alongside research universities.

- International Cooperation and Support: Global South institutions often face structural disadvantages in rankings. International agencies and more developed nations can assist by supporting capacity building – through funding collaborative research, improving internet and library resources, training faculty, etc. – without imposing an agenda. Respect local priorities when giving aid. The goal should be empowering those universities to improve quality on their terms (which eventually may reflect in rankings, but that is secondary). Additionally, global forums (UNESCO, OECD) can facilitate dialogues on developing more fair assessment frameworks. Governments can push these issues on the international stage, advocating for rankings to consider things like sustainable development contributions or equity, aligning with global goals beyond just competition.

In essence, policymakers have a role in shaping an environment where rankings are a tool, not a tyrant. By broadening the definition of university success and safeguarding autonomy, they can mitigate the adverse effects of rankings. When universities know that their funding and reputation at home depend on a spectrum of achievements (not just rank), they can align their strategies accordingly and preserve academic values.

For the Academic Community and Students (briefly): Though not explicitly asked, it's worth noting that faculty and student bodies can also be part of the solution. Faculty can collectively push for maintaining academic standards and freedoms (through senates or unions) even when faced with administrative ranking pressures. Students can demand transparency and that universities invest in teaching and support services, reminding administrators that student outcomes and satisfaction (which relate to teaching quality) should not be neglected. Public discourse led by respected academics about the proper place of rankings can also influence perceptions and reduce undue hype.

By implementing the above recommendations, universities and related stakeholders can work towards what Marginson & van der Wende call "clean" rankings – transparent, methodologically coherent, creating incentives for broad-based improvement, and towards academic strategies that harness the positives of global comparison without succumbing to its distortions. The interplay of these reforms can ensure that academic freedom and institutional autonomy are not only protected but actively promoted as integral components of educational excellence (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007).

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Global university rankings are now an indelible part of the higher education landscape, and their influence on academic freedom and institutional autonomy is both far-reaching and nuanced. On one hand, rankings have spurred beneficial investments and a sharpened focus on excellence, helping institutions benchmark themselves internationally. On the other hand, the "*corrosive effect*" of rankings – encouraging changes that improve rank but not necessarily academic quality

– is a real concern that this chapter has explored across research, teaching, governance, and cultural dimensions. We have seen that an unchecked pursuit of rankings can conflict with academic values: research priorities may shift towards quantity over curiosity, teaching may be undervalued, administrative decisions may become metric-driven at the expense of collegial governance, and universities may drift from their missions to fit a narrow mold of "world-class."

The future of global higher education will likely not abandon rankings, but it can reshape the way we interact with them. The chapter's global perspective – including cases from China, South Africa, Latin America, and elsewhere – underscores that context matters. Established universities with strong traditions might manage to use rankings selectively while preserving autonomy, whereas resource-constrained institutions might find themselves more vulnerable to external pressures. Importantly, even as rankings rise, there is a countervailing force: the enduring belief that universities are more than the sum of their metrics. They are cultural and intellectual institutions, repositories of critical thought, and drivers of social progress.

In moving forward, a central task will be to re-balance the relationship between rankings and academic values. This entails action from all sides: universities re-committing to their academic missions, ranking agencies improving their indicators (and perhaps competing to show who can measure quality most holistically), and governments setting policies that reward genuine quality and uphold freedom. If these stakeholders implement the recommendations outlined – such as broadening metrics to include academic freedom, and protecting diverse institutional identities – the "ranking paradox" can be mitigated. Rankings would then become one reference point among many, rather than a singular goal that overrides all else.

Ultimately, the role of rankings in shaping global higher education should be kept in perspective. As Robinson provocatively asked, is higher education to be valued for its intrinsic worth or reduced to instrumentalist terms?

The hopeful conclusion is that these are not mutually exclusive. Universities can strive for global recognition and improvement (often aided by the data and competition of rankings) while steadfastly maintaining the intrinsic values of academic freedom, critical inquiry, and service to society. The truly "world-class" universities of the future may well be those that find this balance – excelling not only in what

rankings can capture, but also in the less tangible dimensions of education that rankings currently miss. In doing so, they will ensure that the pursuit of excellence and the protection of academic freedom go hand in hand, shaping a higher education system that is both globally competitive and fundamentally humanistic.

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Chapter 7
The Academic Competition Through Academic Rankings

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how global university rankings have transformed higher education into a field of intense academic competition. Institutions across the world now strive to climb league tables, often restructuring priorities and reshaping policies to align with ranking indicators. While these systems have arguably enhanced transparency and accountability, they have also contributed to homogenization, increased pressure, and inequitable comparisons. Drawing on a critical lens, the chapter examines how universities interpret and respond to rankings, and what is gained—or lost—in the pursuit of status. It invites a deeper reflection on whether current ranking mechanisms truly capture the richness and diversity of academic excellence or simply reinforce a narrow definition of success.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, global university rankings have emerged as one of the most influential—and controversial—forces reshaping the landscape of higher education. What began as tools for prospective students and policymakers to gauge institutional performance has evolved into a complex, highly competitive, and sometimes polarizing industry. Universities across continents now find themselves locked in a race for visibility, prestige, and academic dominance, driven in large part by their position

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on various international ranking lists (Bhopal & Myers, 2023). These rankings, published annually by organizations such as QS, Times Higher Education (THE), and the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), are no longer passive reflections of institutional status; they are active instruments that shape university identities, strategic decisions, and policy directions.

This chapter delves into the evolving dynamics of academic competition through the lens of higher education ranking systems. It begins with a historical overview of the ranking phenomenon, charting its rise from relatively simple evaluative frameworks to sophisticated algorithm-driven models that weigh multiple variables such as research output, faculty qualifications, internationalization, and industry collaboration. While the initial intent behind these rankings may have been rooted in transparency and comparability, their current role has expanded far beyond that. Rankings now influence student mobility, faculty recruitment, international collaborations, and even national funding allocations.

The global proliferation of rankings has coincided with a parallel transformation in how universities perceive themselves (Hazelkorn, 2021). Institutions that once saw their mission as grounded in public service, national development, or knowledge creation are now under pressure to market themselves as "world-class," often by aligning their priorities with ranking metrics. This shift has resulted in a growing tension between academic values and managerial imperatives. Universities increasingly adopt corporate-style strategic plans, optimize for performance indicators, and invest in branding and reputation management—all in pursuit of improved ranking outcomes.

This chapter critically examines these developments and interrogates the assumptions embedded within ranking systems. It asks: What are we really measuring when we rank universities? Whose definitions of excellence are being privileged? And what are the consequences—intended or unintended—of using competitive rankings as a proxy for academic quality? As higher education becomes more globalized, rankings have become a common language for comparison, but also a source of deep asymmetry (Kayyali, 2023 B). Prestigious institutions with long-standing reputations and abundant resources tend to dominate the top positions, while universities in the Global South or those with different educational missions struggle to be recognized (Cantwell, 2021). This has created a hierarchy that often reinforces existing inequities and marginalizes institutions that prioritize teaching, community engagement, or indigenous knowledge systems.

Moreover, the methodological opacity and occasional arbitrariness of ranking criteria raise fundamental concerns about fairness and validity. For example, weightings assigned to factors like international faculty ratio or citation impact may disproportionately favor institutions in English-speaking or research-intensive contexts, thereby skewing the global playing field. Such methodological choices,

often presented as neutral or scientific, are in fact deeply normative—they shape what is seen as valuable in higher education and what is not.

Yet, it would be simplistic to dismiss rankings outright. They have introduced a level of performance benchmarking that can be useful for institutional improvement, particularly in systems where accountability mechanisms were previously weak or absent. Rankings can serve as catalysts for innovation, transparency, and global collaboration. However, the key challenge lies in ensuring that their influence does not narrow the mission of universities, reduce education to quantifiable metrics, or privilege form over substance.

This chapter invites a thoughtful exploration of these issues. It seeks to understand not only how rankings affect universities but also how universities, in turn, shape and respond to the ranking ecosystem. Through this inquiry, we aim to uncover whether the current trajectory of academic competition is sustainable, desirable, or in need of radical rethinking.

The Rise of Global University Rankings: A New Arena of Academic Competition

There was a time—perhaps not so distant in memory—when the idea of "ranking" a university would've been met with quiet skepticism. What sense could there be, after all, in assigning a number to an institution tasked with nurturing thought, challenging orthodoxy, and fostering the subtle alchemy of intellectual growth? Universities weren't supposed to compete like corporations; they were communities, guilds of scholars, caretakers of culture, philosophy, science, and ethics. To reduce that to a score? It would have sounded absurd, even offensive. But that was before the era of measurement became king.

Before data dashboards became commonplace in rectors' offices and ministry cabinets. Before the hunt for "excellence" became a public spectacle. Before rankings began to carve deep furrows through the soil of higher education. The rise of global university rankings didn't happen in a single dramatic moment. It crept in—quietly, almost imperceptibly at first—through the language of transparency, accountability, and improvement (Diver, 2022). It made its entrance wrapped in promises: a tool for students to make informed choices, a benchmark for governments to assess public investment, a mirror for institutions to see themselves more clearly. Few would have anticipated how quickly that mirror would become a spotlight—blinding, unforgiving, and fiercely competitive.

The early 2000s marked the beginning of this transformation, catalyzed most notably by the publication of the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) by Shanghai Jiao Tong University in 2003. Originally intended as a diagnostic tool for Chinese universities to gauge their standing against world-class peers, the ranking

quickly escaped its original purpose. It went global, picked up by media outlets, scrutinized by policymakers, whispered about in university corridors. Then came the Times Higher Education Supplement, and later, QS World University Rankings, each with its own methodology, its own emphasis, its own seductive claims of accuracy and relevance (Wilbers & Brankovic, 2023). And just like that, the race was on.

What followed was a reorientation of the entire academic landscape, akin to tectonic plates shifting beneath the feet of universities worldwide. Institutions that had quietly pursued regional excellence or specialized missions found themselves scrambling to "internationalize," to publish in English-language journals, to rebrand themselves with logos, mission statements, and sleek websites promising innovation and global reach. Suddenly, reputation became quantifiable. Research output became currency. Faculty-student ratios were no longer internal benchmarks—they were points on a global scoreboard. But what exactly were we chasing? And who decided which metrics mattered?

The methodology behind global rankings is, in theory, technical—an array of weighted indicators: research productivity, citation impact, international outlook, employer reputation, academic surveys, and more (Lillo Cea, 2024). But this supposed objectivity often masks a more troubling reality: the indicators chosen and the weight assigned to them are not neutral choices. They reflect a particular ideology of what a "good" university looks like: typically large, research-intensive, English-speaking, and embedded within wealthy economies. The consequence? Institutions in developing countries, liberal arts colleges, and teaching-focused universities often find themselves penalized for simply not fitting that mold.

In this sense, rankings haven't just measured global inequalities—they've entrenched them. It's not just about visibility; it's about voice. Who gets to define excellence? Who gets to be heard, remembered, and rewarded? The winners, often, are those who were already winning. The Harvards, the Oxfords, the Stanfords. Their place at the top is rarely threatened. And for the rest? The climb is steep, the air thin, the rules not always fair. And yet, the allure remains.

There's something undeniably magnetic about seeing one's institution rise a few spots in a global ranking. It can energize faculty, attract students, draw investment, and unlock prestige. This emotional undercurrent—part pride, part vanity, part desperation—is rarely acknowledged but deeply felt. Rankings, for all their methodological flaws, carry real consequences. They influence visa policies, national funding formulas, international partnerships, and student recruitment strategies (Maulenova, 2024). A high ranking can legitimize a university in the eyes of a skeptical government or an ambitious parent.

That power is seductive. And dangerous. Academic competition, once confined to peer-reviewed journals and grant applications, has now become institutional. It's no longer just scholars competing—it's entire systems. Ministries of education,

rectors, boards of trustees—everyone's eyes are on the rankings. That shift brings with it a cascade of behavioral changes. Universities begin hiring based not just on scholarly merit, but on H-index scores and publication counts. Research agendas shift toward internationally indexed journals, often at the expense of local relevance. Doctoral students are nudged into publishing early, sometimes prematurely. Libraries are evaluated not by how well they serve students, but by how many high-impact journals they can afford to subscribe to.

Even the act of teaching—arguably the soul of the university—is caught in the crossfire. Because rankings tend to emphasize research over pedagogy, teaching becomes secondary. Lecture halls swell. Faculty burn out. Innovation in curriculum design takes a back seat to grant writing. Some institutions respond by creating "teaching-only" contracts or offloading undergraduate teaching to adjuncts, while reserving research for the elite few who "matter" to the metrics. A kind of academic apartheid begins to form within the very institutions meant to champion equality of thought. There's irony in all this. The very tools designed to promote transparency may be blurring the picture instead.

One of the more insidious effects of the ranking phenomenon is the pressure to manage appearances. Universities are not just trying to improve—they're trying to *look* like they're improving. This leads to a kind of metric theater: the deliberate massaging of data, selective reporting, cosmetic changes dressed up as reforms. Some institutions create international partnerships on paper just to boost their "international outlook" scores. Others pour money into high-profile research centers that serve more as PR assets than engines of discovery. The focus shifts from substance to optics. What's lost in the process? Sometimes it's the local community. Sometimes it's the commitment to unpopular research areas. Sometimes it's the ability to fail, reflect, and learn without fear of judgment.

In countries where education policy is tightly linked to global image, the stakes are even higher. Take, for instance, middle-income countries with ambitious national agendas—Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, India's Institutes of Eminence, Malaysia's push for regional leadership. In these contexts, rankings become part of the national identity project. Universities are not just centers of learning; they are symbols of modernity, development, global belonging. The pressure to climb the ladder can lead to extraordinary investment—but also extraordinary distortion. Local languages are sidelined. Traditional disciplines lose funding. Research becomes disconnected from local needs. And yet, resistance is not easy.

Try explaining to a prospective international student why your university doesn't appear in the top 500 (Bound, 2021). Try convincing a donor to invest in your community-engaged research program when the same funds could go into hiring a Nobel laureate who'll bump your citation score. Try telling faculty to prioritize

mentorship and holistic education when they know that only journal publications "count." The game is rigged—but not playing comes at a cost.

There are moments, though, glimmers, when the system gets questioned. Scholars pushing for alternative rankings that emphasize equity, impact, or sustainability. Regional networks developing homegrown indicators. Coalitions of universities refusing to participate in global rankings altogether (Calderon, 2021). These are acts of quiet rebellion—sometimes symbolic, sometimes substantial. They remind us that the future is not set in stone. Because deep down, most academics know the truth: the value of a university can't be captured in a number. It lives in the sparks between student and teacher, in the long nights of failure and discovery, in the stubborn pursuit of questions no one's asking yet. It lives in the messy, unpredictable, deeply human work of making sense of the world. So where does that leave us?

Still in the race, for now. But perhaps with clearer eyes. The rise of global university rankings has undeniably changed the rules of engagement in higher education. It has introduced new forms of visibility, new incentives, and new stakes. But it has also narrowed the field, privileging certain forms of knowledge, certain kinds of institutions, and certain ways of being in the world. The challenge ahead is not to dismantle the idea of assessment altogether—but to expand it, to enrich it, to make room for other stories. There is room for ambition in academia. But ambition without introspection leads to mimicry, not meaning.

If rankings are here to stay—and they likely are—then perhaps the next frontier is not in trying to outpace the others, but in learning how to walk our own path with integrity. To define success on our own terms. To remember, always, that the worth of a university is not in its rank, but in its reach—its capacity to stretch minds, build bridges, and imagine a future that doesn't yet exist.

Ranking Methodologies and Their Influence on Institutional Behavior

It starts with numbers. A few metrics here, a weighted average there, and soon an entire institution—decades of scholarship, thousands of lives, a web of culture, context, and ambition—is compressed into a single rank. Forty-seven. Or two hundred and eight. Or somewhere off the page entirely. And somehow, that number begins to speak louder than the thousands of nuanced truths it fails to contain. Odd, isn't it? How something so abstract and synthetic can come to wield so much concrete influence.

University ranking methodologies, with all their statistical acrobatics and technical gloss, have become the invisible hand shaping the priorities, anxieties, and strategies of higher education institutions around the globe (Alanazi, 2024). The metrics might seem innocuous at first glance—research output, citations per faculty,

international student ratio, employer reputation—but behind each number lies a subtle imperative. A kind of behavioral nudge. Institutions, perhaps unwittingly at first, start rearranging themselves to fit these measuring tapes, until the pursuit of education begins to resemble the pursuit of points.

Let's not pretend the methodology is neutral. It's coded with assumptions—many implicit, some deeply ideological. The logic that more citations mean better research, that higher international faculty ratios signify quality, or that employer surveys can meaningfully assess graduate preparedness, is taken as gospel. But these are not self-evident truths; they are preferences dressed up as universals. And yet, institutions respond as though the commandments have been etched in stone. Not because they necessarily believe them, but because the consequences of ignoring them are real.

There's an odd duality in how universities approach rankings. On one hand, there's public critique—statements from rectors and education ministers lamenting the narrowness of the indicators, the cultural bias, the English-language hegemony. On the other, there's internal compliance. Strategy documents begin aligning with ranking indicators. Budget allocations are justified by potential "ranking gains." New positions emerge: Directors of Institutional Effectiveness, Data Officers for Rankings Optimization (Lai & Hariguna, 2025). Faculty are asked, sometimes gently, sometimes not, to publish in high-impact journals, preferably indexed by Scopus or Web of Science.

The behavioral impact is subtle but pervasive. Universities begin to pivot—not necessarily toward better education, but toward what rankings reward. In some cases, this leads to genuine improvements: better research infrastructure, more rigorous data collection, an increased appetite for international collaboration. But in many others, it results in distortions. Gaming the system becomes an unofficial sport. Partnerships are formed for appearances, not substance. Research becomes less exploratory, more targeted—designed to produce publishable results, preferably in journals with high impact factors, which in turn amplifies citation counts. The academic soul, once rooted in curiosity, begins to lean toward metrics.

The teaching mission, often already undervalued, suffers further marginalization. Rankings rarely consider pedagogical innovation, student satisfaction (outside of self-reported surveys), or community engagement—so these fall to the periphery (Lowe, 2023). Professors begin to feel the tension: pour time into mentoring and teaching, or invest in the kind of research that will elevate their H-index and, by extension, their institution's ranking? It's a Faustian choice in slow motion, one that chips away at the less quantifiable joys of academic life.

What's more, the methodological opacity of some rankings—particularly those relying heavily on reputational surveys—breeds distrust. Reputation, it turns out, is sticky. Institutions already known to be elite continue to be rated highly by default. Lesser-known universities, even when making significant strides, struggle to shake

off their shadows. It creates a self-fulfilling loop: prestige leads to better survey results, which lead to higher rankings, which reinforce prestige. It's brand momentum masquerading as meritocracy. And yet, for many institutions, especially those in emerging economies, the choice isn't really a choice. Global rankings function like passports to the international academic community. Climbing the charts can mean access to funding, the ability to attract top faculty, international student interest, and political favor. In countries where public investment in education is tied to performance indicators—some of which mimic ranking metrics—there is little room to opt out. Rankings become both carrot and stick.

The methodologies also shape how institutions see their peers—and themselves. Benchmarking becomes an obsession (Dagdag & Daracan, 2025). Universities begin comparing themselves with others not based on shared mission or local context, but on similar rankings tiers. An institution in Southeast Asia might compare itself with one in Canada or Finland, not because their goals or challenges align, but because they're both hovering around #500. The logic of competition flattens difference and encourages mimicry. Everyone starts chasing the same model: the elite, research-intensive, internationally mobile university. But what happens to diversity in that equation? What about universities whose missions are rooted in regional development, indigenous knowledge, or community-based learning? Methodologies rarely account for these values. The indicators don't "see" them. As a result, such institutions are often relegated to the margins—not because they lack quality, but because they don't fit the frame.

Let's talk about "internationalization"—a favorite metric in many rankings (Blanco et al, 2021). On the surface, it seems like a positive goal: more cross-border collaboration, exposure to different perspectives, greater mobility (Kayyali, 2020). But in practice, the metric often rewards surface-level diversity. Recruit more international students? Check. Hire faculty from abroad? Check. But does it matter if those students are clustered in commercialized master's programs with little integration into the broader academic community? Or if faculty are hired more for nationality than for substantive contributions? The numbers say yes. The reality might say something else entirely.

Even infrastructure is not immune to this metric-induced logic. Some universities invest in eye-catching buildings, high-tech labs, and flagship projects—not necessarily because they're needed, but because they look impressive in rankings reports (Benneworth & Arregui-Pabollet, 2021). Glossy facilities signal ambition, seriousness, global stature. Whether they genuinely improve the student or faculty experience is sometimes secondary. The long-term consequences of this metric-driven governance are hard to ignore. Institutional autonomy begins to erode—not by governmental overreach, but through voluntary submission to external indicators. Strategic planning becomes less about long-term vision and more about short-term

ranking gains. Some universities even time their reforms to align with ranking cycles, rushing through initiatives in time for the next data submission window. It's a rhythm that favors performativity over depth.

There's also a psychological toll that rarely gets mentioned. Faculty and administrators, already overburdened, begin to feel the grind of constant evaluation. A culture of surveillance creeps in. Departments are asked to justify their existence based on publication metrics. Younger academics, especially, are caught in a pressure cooker: publish fast, publish big, or fall behind. The result? Burnout, anxiety, sometimes a loss of the very passion that drew them to academia in the first place.

Still, institutions keep dancing to the same tune. Not out of naïveté, but necessity. The influence of ranking methodologies is, by now, so deeply embedded in the fabric of institutional life that imagining an alternative seems almost utopian. And yet, there are glimpses—small, scattered signs—that a reimagining is possible. Movements like the Leiden Manifesto or DORA (Declaration on Research Assessment) have begun to challenge the dominance of narrow bibliometric indicators (Sivertsen, 2022). Some rankings are experimenting with new indicators: social impact, sustainability, equity. A few institutions have gone as far as withdrawing from global rankings altogether, choosing instead to define success on their own terms. Still, such moves are the exception, not the norm. Most universities continue to walk a delicate tightrope: striving for upward mobility in rankings while trying to preserve their integrity, relevance, and humanity (Rosenberg, 2023). It's not an easy balance. Some succeed. Many struggles. And across the board, the question lingers: Are we improving, or just appearing to improve?

In the end, ranking methodologies are not just about numbers—they are about values. They encode a vision of what higher education should be, who it should serve, and how success should be measured. When institutions conform to these visions without question, they risk losing something essential: their uniqueness, their mission, their voice. The real work lies in reclaiming that voice. Not by rejecting measurement altogether, but by insisting on better measurements—ones that reflect the richness, messiness, and moral complexity of education. Ones that recognize that not all excellence is visible, and not all value is quantifiable. Until then, universities will continue to adapt, shape-shifting around the metrics that define their place in the pecking order. Some will rise. Some will fall. All will be measured. But the most important questions may remain unanswered.

Strategic Responses: How Universities Compete in the Ranking Game

It doesn't take long after a new set of global rankings is released for the emails to start flying behind closed doors. A quiet sense of urgency grips the administra-

tion. Senior leadership meets. The figures are dissected. What changed? Why did we drop four places? Why didn't we climb like we expected? What are they doing that we're not?

It's not unlike watching a sports team study its rivals after a bitter loss. Except here, the scoreboard isn't goals or points—it's a weighted average of research outputs, faculty ratios, internationalization indices, and a reputation index that no one quite knows how to influence, yet everyone is obsessed with. Welcome to the backstage of higher education, where strategy is molded not solely by mission or vision but by metrics, optics, and the hunger to be seen.

Universities don't simply fall into the ranking game; they engineer their way into it (Wilbers & Brankovic, 2023). Consciously. Calculatedly. Sometimes reluctantly, sometimes enthusiastically. Strategies are formed not only to improve the quality of education and research but to perform better—visibly better—on the criteria set by rankings agencies. And the distinction between those two aims, while subtle, is profound. What follows is a sprawling, often chaotic tapestry of institutional behavior—ambition, mimicry, opportunism, genuine reform, and the occasional ethical compromise—all in pursuit of a higher rung on the ever-shifting academic ladder.

First, there's the optics of research. Universities have long been measured by their scholarly contributions, but the rise of rankings has accelerated a kind of publication economy (Audretsch et al, 2022). Institutions now scrutinize where their faculty publish as much as what they publish. Journals indexed in Scopus or Web of Science are the golden tickets. Faculty are nudged—gently or not—to submit work to high-impact, internationally ranked journals. Sometimes departments adopt informal quotas. Some go so far as to tie incentives to impact factors and citation counts. Bonuses, promotions, tenure decisions—they all start orbiting around the gravitational pull of visibility metrics. It's not that the research suddenly became less meaningful. It's that its meaning started getting filtered through the lens of measurability.

What gets lost in that equation? Research in local languages, for one. Deep, qualitative inquiry, for another. Projects rooted in community engagement, indigenous knowledge, or social justice often fall by the wayside—not because they lack substance, but because they lack the kind of citational currency rankings reward. The metrics aren't built to catch those nuances. And when universities begin aligning their strategic goals with ranking metrics, the invisible becomes expendable (Tripathi & Nundy, 2025).

Next comes the internationalization dance. On paper, this seems harmless—encouraging institutions to bring in diverse faculty, enroll students from abroad, forge cross-border collaborations. But peel back the layers, and you'll find a more nuanced story. Many universities engage in what's been called "cosmetic interna-

tionalization": rapidly recruiting foreign faculty, often in visiting or adjunct roles, to boost statistics rather than deepen intercultural exchange. Some create English-only programs not to meet student demand, but to signal global readiness. Others chase partnerships with overseas institutions, even if they're tenuous or symbolic, simply to be able to list them in their submissions.

Real collaboration—messy, complex, resource-intensive—is harder to quantify and, paradoxically, often undervalued in this system. So what you get instead are lightweight Memoranda of Understanding, signed and shelved, used to pad institutional portfolios without transforming academic practice. Then there's the branding pivot. Universities begin to act more like companies—rebranding, relaunching, revamping websites, producing glossy reports timed precisely to coincide with ranking cycles (Flannery, 2021). Strategic communication becomes an industry in itself. There are consultants, workshops, webinars. Some universities hire entire teams tasked specifically with ranking performance—data analysts, PR specialists, SEO experts. It's no longer just about what a university *does*; it's about how it *presents* what it does to the world. And in the age of rankings, perception is half the battle.

The more competitive institutions, especially those with resources to spare, go further still. They initiate what could only be described as "academic talent poaching." A growing number of universities engage in bidding wars for highly cited researchers, sometimes offering eye-watering salaries, lab space, and publication incentives. The logic is simple and cold: one prolific scholar with a strong citation record can lift the university's entire research profile. It's a strategic investment—but one that doesn't always reflect broader institutional capacity. Hiring one academic star doesn't necessarily improve the student experience or strengthen the curriculum. But it does nudge a few numbers upward.

The downstream effects of these strategies are complex. In some cases, they ignite positive change—greater focus on research infrastructure, improved faculty development, more attention to international partnerships. In other cases, they create perverse incentives. Research becomes rushed. Teaching is deprioritized. Faculty morale declines. An institution might look better on paper but feel hollow on the inside. And then there's the unspoken hierarchy that forms internally. Not all departments contribute equally to ranking metrics, so not all receive equal support. Science and engineering faculties, with their high publication rates and access to international grants, become the darlings of institutional strategy. Humanities and social sciences, unless exceptionally prolific, often find themselves underfunded or marginalized. It's not just a shift in priorities—it's a slow redistribution of academic legitimacy, based on what is easily measured and externally rewarded.

For institutions in the Global South, the game is even more fraught. Competing on an international playing field with inherently unequal footing, they are often forced to make stark choices. Should they invest in globally oriented programs, even if they

serve a small elite, or focus on broader access and equity at the expense of rankings? Should they publish in expensive, international journals or support local-language scholarship? These are not abstract dilemmas; they are daily decisions, influenced by political pressures, budget constraints, and societal expectations.

Some respond by going all in. National flagship universities often receive disproportionate funding to climb rankings and boost national pride (Katsinas et al, 2022). Governments may create performance-based funding schemes, tying financial support to ranking improvements. This fuels a winner-takes-all model, where top-tier institutions consolidate resources, while others struggle in the shadows. It also puts universities in a bind: to play the game well, they must cater to the rules—even if those rules distort their mission.

Others attempt a balancing act. They adopt a dual strategy—meeting ranking metrics just enough to stay in the game while trying to protect their broader educational values. This requires a rare kind of institutional agility and moral clarity. Few get it right. But the effort itself is telling: a quiet resistance within the machinery. And yet, some are pushing back more loudly. A handful of universities, particularly in Europe and Latin America, have opted out of rankings entirely, criticizing their reductionist logic and narrow focus (Kayyali, 2023 A). These institutions seek to define excellence on their own terms—prioritizing sustainability, social impact, cultural preservation, or democratic governance. Their stance is bold, but costly. It often means less visibility, fewer international applicants, limited access to global networks. The road less traveled isn't always paved.

Even within institutions that do chase rankings, there are voices of dissent. Faculty question the logic of metrics. Students lament the depersonalization of learning. Some administrators quietly acknowledge that the obsession with rankings has gone too far. But changing course is not easy once the machinery is set in motion. It's one thing to critique the system; it's another to escape its gravitational pull.

Still, beneath the surface of all this strategic maneuvering, there's a deeper longing—an institutional desire to matter. To be recognized. To be seen as part of the global conversation. That desire, however politicized or instrumentalized, is not trivial. It's tied to institutional identity, to national pride, to a collective yearning for relevance in a world that often feels indifferent. Rankings promise a pathway to that recognition—even if the price is steep. But perhaps the most important question universities must now ask themselves isn't *how* to rise in the rankings, but *why*. What are they actually trying to achieve? Who benefits from their climb? And what kind of institution do they want to be when the spotlight fades?

Strategic responses to rankings are, at their core, about navigating contradictions. Between visibility and authenticity. Between metrics and meaning. Between ambition and integrity. The best institutions are not those that reject strategy, but those that remember why they exist in the first place. There's room for pragmatism in higher

education. But not if it replaces purpose. The challenge is to compete without losing oneself—to play the game, perhaps, but never forget that the game is not the goal.

The Double-Edged Sword: Benefits and Pitfalls of Ranking-Driven Policies

There's a certain seduction in the certainty of numbers. A kind of comfort in seeing a complex, unwieldy thing—like a university—packaged into a percentile, a tier, a neat little global position. It gives the illusion of clarity. A benchmark. A signal. To policymakers, it offers justification. To university leaders, a compass. To students and parents, a shortcut. But like all sharp instruments, rankings cut both ways. And the policies built around them? They often resemble swords—gleaming, purposeful, and just as likely to wound as to uplift.

The paradox begins with this simple truth: ranking-driven policies work. They do. They move the needle. They rally attention. They create urgency in systems that might otherwise drift into inertia. For institutions that once floated beneath the radar—underfunded, unrecognized, scattered in their priorities—rankings can bring focus. A target. A reason to strategize. They inspire reform, sharpen institutional governance, stimulate output, and in some cases, unlock substantial public investment. Take a middle-income country looking to become a regional academic hub. Rankings give its universities a global stage to aspire to. Governments begin channeling funds toward research productivity, doctoral programs, infrastructure, and international faculty (Plance & Owen, 2023). Performance indicators get tied to results. Bureaucracy starts to shift. The university wakes up—ambitious, restless, forward-facing. Suddenly, there's momentum. You can feel it in the hiring decisions, the lab renovations, the launch of new journals. The institution, once dormant, begins to breathe. And at first, it feels right. Better. Necessary, even. Because for all the criticisms leveled against rankings—and there are many—it's impossible to deny their catalyzing power. They force reflection. They push universities to gather data they never had. They spotlight excellence where once there was obscurity. And for students with few resources or little knowledge of global academia, rankings can be a lifeline—a way to navigate a sea of options, to reach beyond borders and dream of elsewhere (Tripathi & Nundy, 2025). But then the unintended consequences start to emerge, quietly at first, then with a kind of creeping permanence. The institution, in chasing better scores, starts to rewire itself. It learns what the rankings reward—and what they ignore. Teaching begins to fade into the background. Outreach becomes an afterthought. And the subtle, slow erosion of academic values begins. Because here's the thing: rankings don't measure care. They don't capture mentorship, the tone of a seminar discussion, the ethical courage of a curriculum that centers marginalized voices. They don't reward faculty who spend hours guiding struggling students, or

those who choose to research topics not because they're popular but because they're important. And yet, universities adapt to what is counted (Kayyali, 2023 D).

Policies shift accordingly. New recruitment strategies prioritize researchers with high h-indexes. Departments with low publication output are quietly defunded (Akhtar, 2024). Interdisciplinary centers that don't generate citations are shuttered. The broader intellectual ecosystem—one that depends on the messy, generous, unruly spaces of creativity and critique—starts to look a bit more sterile. Sanitized for performance. There's also the matter of homogenization. As institutions tune themselves to the same indicators, a sameness begins to creep in. Everyone wants to be a research university. Everyone chases international faculty. Everyone rewrites their mission in the language of excellence, impact, and global relevance. The diversity of institutional missions—the lifeblood of any healthy system—gets flattened. A university focused on social mobility, or environmental resilience, or postcolonial knowledge, finds itself pressured to pivot or risk irrelevance.

One can see it in curriculum decisions too. Programs are evaluated less for their transformative potential and more for their alignment with market trends or employability statistics. Liberal arts get nudged aside in favor of STEM-heavy disciplines. Not because they're failing, but because they don't perform well in global rankings frameworks. The logic is brutal: if it doesn't contribute to score improvement, it becomes dispensable. Even student demographics are not immune to these shifts. Some universities, eager to improve student selectivity metrics, become less inclusive. Admission policies are quietly adjusted to attract students with high standardized scores, regardless of background or circumstance (Springer et al, 2023). The result? Access shrinks, and the social mission of higher education gets quietly rewritten. And then there's the question of equity. Ranking-driven policies disproportionately benefit institutions that are already well-resourced. It's easier to rise in the rankings when you start near the top. For universities in the Global South or those serving marginalized communities, the climb is steep, the rules foreign, and the rewards often elusive. The metrics favor large research budgets, established publication pipelines, English-language dominance, and reputation among elite peers. It's a game designed for those who've already won.

So, what do institutions do when they know they can't win? Some try to play smarter. They pour resources into ranking consultancy services. They pay to be included in certain indicators. They hire experts to optimize data submission. They game the system—carefully, methodically. Others simply opt out, refusing to let rankings dictate their policies. But even then, the pressure doesn't disappear. Students still ask. Governments still compare. Global partners still judge. The emotional cost of all this is rarely discussed. Faculty begin to feel like pawns in a game whose rules keep changing. The joy of teaching, the freedom to experiment, the permission to fail—it all starts to get crowded out by performance reviews, publication demands,

and the relentless pursuit of metrics. Administrators are caught between two worlds: the public rhetoric of values, and the internal logic of rankings compliance. It's exhausting. And often demoralizing.

Yet for all its faults, the system persists. Because it offers something powerful: visibility. Recognition. Status. And in a global academic landscape defined by scarcity—of funding, of attention, of prestige—those things are hard to walk away from (Mendoza, 2023). Even when they cost more than they give. Still, not all is bleak. Some institutions are trying to carve new paths. They're adopting broader performance frameworks that include community impact, teaching quality, and student well-being. They're experimenting with participatory governance, where policies are shaped not just by executive boards but by faculty, students, and staff. They're investing in open access publishing, supporting research in local languages, and decentering Eurocentric paradigms.

Some ranking organizations have also begun to evolve. New indices now measure social impact, sustainability, and civic engagement. These are welcome shifts. But they remain in the shadow of the big three—QS, THE, ARWU—whose criteria continue to dominate strategic planning across the globe. The real challenge is philosophical. Rankings offer clarity in an age of complexity. They offer a sense of order. But higher education is not a commodity to be ranked like hotels or smartphones. It is, or should be, a public good—a space for questioning, for slow thinking, for nurturing a future that doesn't yet exist. When policies are built primarily to serve rankings, that deeper purpose can get lost in translation.

So, what's the alternative? Not a wholesale rejection of assessment. Universities must be accountable. They must strive to improve (Kabaker, 2025). But the tools we use to measure must be better—more inclusive, more contextual, more attuned to the messy beauty of real learning. Policies should be informed by rankings, not ruled by them. They should reflect the full spectrum of institutional missions, not force convergence around a single model. Perhaps it begins with courage. The courage to ask: What do we really value? What kind of university are we becoming? And is the pursuit of a higher number—this year, next year, always—bringing us closer to that vision? Because at the end of the day, policies shape behavior. And behavior shapes culture. A culture obsessed with rankings may win temporary accolades, but it risks losing its soul. That's the danger of the double-edged sword. It cuts forward. And it cuts deep.

Toward a More Equitable Future: Rethinking Academic Excellence Beyond Metrics

At some point, every system that measures excellence ends up shaping it. And in shaping it, it inevitably excludes something—someone. Maybe it's a rural univer-

sity that trains first-generation students with tenacity and care but lacks the glossy international faculty ratio. Maybe it's a research team publishing groundbreaking findings in an indigenous language, invisible to the citation engines that speak only in English. Or perhaps it's a young academic who chooses to spend time mentoring students rather than chasing publication quotas. These acts, often dismissed as minor or peripheral, aren't failures—they're casualties of a system that doesn't see them.

What does it mean, then, to talk about academic excellence in a world increasingly ruled by metrics? Is excellence the ability to win grants, publish in high-impact journals, and climb league tables—or is it something else entirely? And if we've narrowed our definition so much that only a few elite institutions can meet it, have we actually improved education—or simply made it more exclusive?

The machinery of global rankings, for all its reach and power, tends to favor a single model of the university: large, research-intensive, English-speaking, well-funded, globally networked (Wagner & Dietrich, 2024). It's a model that grew out of a particular historical and cultural context—one steeped in colonial legacies, corporate logics, and Western epistemologies. Yet it's now being applied, almost universally, as the gold standard. The message it sends is clear: to succeed, emulate this. Conform. Replicate. Fit the mold. But the mold doesn't fit everyone. Nor should it.

Universities are not factories churning out standardized products. They're living institutions, each with its own mission, context, and rhythm (Penprase & Pickus, 2023). Some are rooted in communities that have been historically marginalized, working quietly to reverse centuries of educational inequality. Others are laboratories of experimental pedagogy, daring to rethink what learning even looks like. And then there are institutions deeply entwined with local culture, economy, or ecology—doing work that is profoundly impactful yet invisible in the metrics of global rankings.

This is the great irony of the current landscape: the more we measure, the less we often see. The subtleties, the stories, the soul of education—none of that is captured in a bar graph. Rankings can tell us who publishes the most or attracts the most international students, but they say little about who transforms lives in the classroom, who fosters belonging, who opens intellectual doors for those the world forgot.

So how do we begin to rethink academic excellence in a way that makes space for more than numbers? It starts, perhaps, with asking better questions. Not "Where does this university rank?" but "Who does it serve?" Not "How many citations?" but "What kind of impact, and on whom?" Not "Is this institution globally visible?" but "Is it locally vital?" These questions don't fit neatly into spreadsheets, and maybe that's the point. They demand engagement, conversation, complexity. They force us to think relationally, not just competitively. Because excellence, in any meaningful sense, isn't about outpacing others—it's about fulfilling a purpose with depth, courage, and integrity.

To move toward a more equitable future in higher education, we must unhook quality from uniformity. Excellence should not require conformity to a single path. It should flourish in multiplicity—in institutions that prioritize care over prestige, that innovate without needing to internationalize, that carry histories and futures not recognized by algorithms but written in the lives they change. Of course, none of this is simple. Metrics exist for a reason. They bring clarity in a field crowded with complexity. They help allocate funding, signal accountability, and drive improvement. The answer is not to discard measurement altogether, but to reimagine what we choose to measure—and why.

Imagine a system that values collaboration as much as competition. That rewards institutions for improving the conditions of their students and surrounding communities, not just for producing highly cited papers. A system that recognizes the courage to teach difficult truths, the persistence of research that serves the public good even when it's not profitable, and the beauty of languages, perspectives, and knowledges that have long been ignored. Some have already begun this work. The Times Higher Education Impact Rankings, for instance, attempt to assess universities based on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (De la Poza et al, 2021). While imperfect, they offer a step toward recognizing contributions beyond academia's traditional prestige economy. Meanwhile, initiatives like the Leiden Manifesto and DORA have pushed for more thoughtful, contextualized use of metrics in research evaluation. These efforts signal a desire to break away from monolithic measures and embrace a more pluralistic vision of quality. But systemic change requires more than new rankings. It demands a cultural shift—within universities, funding agencies, ministries, and accreditation bodies. It requires leaders who are willing to speak a different language, to redefine success in a way that reflects the lived reality of diverse institutions (Kayyali, 2023 C). It also requires listening—really listening—to those who have been sidelined by dominant models: scholars from the Global South, indigenous communities, teaching-focused academics, students whose stories don't make it into the metrics.

There is something profoundly radical in slowing down to ask whether the direction we're heading is the right one. Especially in an era obsessed with speed, with scale, with visibility. Perhaps the most courageous thing a university can do today is resist the pressure to be seen, and instead focus on being felt—deeply, by those who pass through its halls. There's a strange kind of power in returning to the basics. Teaching that nourishes. Research that matters. Leadership rooted in humility. A culture of inclusion that isn't just performative. When institutions reclaim these foundations—not as sentimental relics, but as urgent priorities—they begin to shape a new kind of excellence. One that is less about prestige and more about purpose.

This kind of shift doesn't happen all at once. It happens slowly, almost imperceptibly—through new policies, different kinds of incentives, revised promotion

criteria, reimagined accreditation standards (Kayyali, 2024). It happens when rankings stop being the north star and become one of many instruments for navigation. It happens when students are asked not just to score well, but to reflect meaningfully. And it happens when faculty are trusted not only for their output but for their judgment, their mentorship, their care. Of course, resisting the dominant paradigm comes with risks. Institutions that deprioritize rankings may lose visibility. They may be misunderstood. They may struggle to attract partnerships or funding. But over time, if enough universities commit to a broader, more just definition of excellence, the paradigm itself may begin to shift. And maybe that's where the real hope lies—not in reforming rankings from the top down, but in changing the culture from the ground up. In building networks of solidarity between institutions that choose to walk a different path. In sharing tools, ideas, and frameworks that make room for difference. In showing, through action, that another way is not only possible but already unfolding—in quiet classrooms, in overlooked journals, in small acts of defiance and large acts of vision. Because academic excellence, if it's to mean anything at all, must belong to everyone.

Not just to the famous, the well-funded, the globally ranked. But to the forgotten, the emerging, the unconventional. To those who dream in languages rarely heard at international conferences. To those who teach because they believe learning is sacred. To those who research because the world is hurting and the answers, though elusive, are worth chasing. The future of higher education doesn't need more rankings. It needs more courage. More imagination. More equity. More room for messy, human excellence—the kind that resists capture, that grows in soil far from the spotlight, that carries within it the seeds of something bigger than any metric can contain. It's time to stop chasing numbers and start building meaning. And perhaps, in doing so, we'll discover a new kind of prestige—one that's not measured in scores or citations, but in lives touched, minds opened, and futures made possible.

CONCLUSION

As this chapter has demonstrated, global university rankings have become more than just tools of assessment; they are now engines of competition that permeate nearly every layer of higher education policy and practice. Their influence is felt in how institutions define success, allocate resources, recruit staff and students, and market themselves to the world. In the name of global visibility and reputation, many universities have recalibrated their missions to align with ranking criteria—sometimes at the cost of their unique identities, social obligations, and academic diversity.

The core issue is not that rankings exist, but how they are interpreted, applied, and responded to. Rankings are not inherently good or bad—they are frameworks

built upon particular values, priorities, and assumptions. The danger lies in mistaking these frameworks for absolute truths or allowing them to dictate institutional behavior uncritically. When universities chase numbers rather than nurture substance, when the appearance of excellence is privileged over authentic impact, and when superficial competitiveness overshadows collaborative growth, the very ethos of higher education is compromised.

Moreover, the standardization inherent in rankings often overlooks the contextual richness of academic institutions. A university in rural Africa serving underrepresented communities with innovative pedagogies may never rank highly by global metrics—but its societal contribution could far exceed that of a highly ranked, elite university in terms of local impact. In this sense, rankings risk becoming tools of exclusion, privileging institutions that already possess structural advantages while marginalizing those that operate outside the dominant paradigm.

There is also a psychological toll associated with constant comparison. The pressure to improve rankings can lead to a culture of performance anxiety within universities, affecting faculty morale, student experience, and even the integrity of research. When citations, publications, and branding replace mentorship, curiosity, and intellectual risk-taking, we must pause and ask: What kind of academic culture are we cultivating?

Yet, the future need not be one of resignation. Universities still have the agency to redefine their relationship with rankings. They can use ranking data selectively and critically, without allowing it to override institutional values or strategic goals. They can advocate for more transparent and inclusive methodologies that recognize diverse missions and contexts. They can also collaborate across borders to create alternative models of assessment that are less competitive and more holistic—ones that reward knowledge-sharing, community engagement, and ethical innovation.

In conclusion, the academic competition fueled by higher education rankings is a mirror reflecting both our aspirations and our anxieties. It reveals the tensions between excellence and equity, between visibility and value, and between global recognition and local relevance. The challenge ahead is not to dismantle the mirror, but to question what it reflects, who it benefits, and how it might be redesigned to serve the broader, nobler purposes of education. For if universities are to remain beacons of truth, justice, and progress, they must resist becoming mere contestants in a global race and reclaim their role as architects of a better, wiser world.

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Chapter 8
Ethical Implications of Global University Rankings: Balancing competition and educational integrity

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ABSTRACT

Global university rankings possess a significant impact on institutional strategies, student choices, and higher education legislation. Although they are frequently viewed as tools for monitoring and fostering high standards, their dependence on narrow performance metrics like as research output, citation frequency, and global reputation can distort institutional objectives. Institutions may find themselves concentrating more on satisfying market needs as competition intensifies rather than adhering to their core social and educational objectives. Many educational principles may be undermined by the growing emphasis on quantifiable outcomes, which reduces intricate intellectual pursuits to simple metrics. This chapter aims to explore the need for structural changes and ethical reconsiderations of global university rankings to better reflect academic honesty, inclusivity, and the core values of higher education.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Global university rankings have become a key indicator impacting institutional policies, funding, international partnerships, and student selections in the ever changing world of higher education (Kwiek, 2016). The Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), QS World University Rankings, Times Higher Education (THE), and other organizations that publish these rankings are seen as indicators of academic quality and international reputation (Safón, 2019). However, there are a number of ethical dilemmas hidden beneath the surface objectivity of ratings. These worries include the methods used in the ranking process, as well as the unintended effects of educational institutions placing a greater emphasis on statistics than on their purpose (Andersson & Mayer, 2017). Concerns have been raised about the fairness of the ranking process, the integrity of universities educational goals, and the consequences for academic freedom, curricular variety, and institutional independence as universities increasingly adjust their strategies to fit ranking standards (Polyakov et al., 2020).

Many institutions have implemented plans specifically designed to boost their rankings in response to competitive pressures. Some of these tactics can include morally questionable practices, while others include real quality improvements like increasing research output or fostering international cooperation (Anahideh & Mohabbati-Kalejahi, 2022). Examples include restricting access to programs that don't advance ranking criteria, recruiting scientists with high citation counts only to increase metrics, or manipulating data (Yakusheva & Weiss, 2017). Faculty may be under pressure to submit to high-impact publications, sometimes at the cost of their instructional responsibilities or the local applicability of their research. Additionally, the focus on metrics might hinder innovation and academic freedom. If interdisciplinary or socially involved research does not match rating criteria, instructors may be deterred from doing it. Curriculum choices may prioritize what is measurable and marketable over what is morally and pedagogically appropriate.

Global university rankings also contribute to the stratification of higher education systems. Elite institutions with established reputations, abundant resources, and global networks are better positioned to perform well in rankings (Hazelkorn, 2016). Conversely, newer or underfunded institutions particularly those in the Global South struggle to compete on equal footing. High-ranking institutions attract top students, faculty, and funding, which in turn helps them maintain or improve their rankings. (Sarupiciute & Druteikiene, 2016). Lower-ranked institutions face challenges in attracting the same caliber of talent or investment, regardless of the actual quality or relevance of their educational offerings. Moreover, the global prestige economy created by rankings can undermine local institutions that serve critical societal functions. For example, a regional university with a strong community engagement

mission may be undervalued despite its significant social impact. This raises ethical questions about the role of education in promoting social justice, equity, and inclusion (Velasquez, 2021).

The commodification of education, which rankings promote, is another ethical issue. Rankings encourage a market logic where institutions are seen as brands and students as consumers by simplifying complicated educational experiences into numerical values. Educations inherent worth as a public benefit and instrument for individual and social change may be diminished (Smolennikov et al., 2024).

Universities may also be motivated by the quest for rankings to put profit above educational integrity. It is also evident in the growth of initiatives that prioritize marketability over academic rigor or social significance. Such trends run the danger of turning universities into corporate organizations that prioritize efficiency over education and competition over cooperation. Performance indicators and market share may take precedence over the fundamental principles of education, such as critical inquiry, academic integrity, ethical reasoning, and civic responsibility (Teese, 2010).

The emerging competition criteria, studies, international educational initiatives, and collaborations are revealing unique and specific types of global rankings. The rise of global rankings in recent years has attracted significant attention to the development of higher education and highlighted the comparison of universities both locally and internationally. University rankings have certainly helped to promote greater responsibility, accountability, and increased pressure to enhance management practices in higher education. There is a risk that universities focusing their time and financial resources on gathering and utilizing statistics and data to enhance their performance in rankings may compromise their advancement in other vital areas, such as education, teaching methods, or community engagement (Khan et al., 2020).

The ethical consequences of worldwide university rankings are explored in this chapter, along with how they relate to competition and academic integrity (Brankovic et al., 2018). It makes the case that rankings, while capable of promoting healthy competition and encouraging innovation, also run the danger of turning education into a commodity, widening inequality, and shifting focus away from fundamental academic principles (Soudien, 2021).

Methodological Framework

This methodological framework is adapted from the performance evaluation model developed at Wuhan University, as proposed **by Yang Tiantian in June 2020**. The framework employs six key indicators that are widely regarded as effective in measuring the performance and global competitiveness of universities. Each indicator is assigned a specific weight, reflecting its relative importance in the overall assessment.

Figure 1. This framework is adapted from Wuhan University written by Yang Tiantian in June 2020.



Source: https://news.whu.edu.cn/info/1002/60804.htm

The parameters and their weights are as follows: Academic Reputation (40%), Employer Reputation (10%), Faculty/Student Ratio (20%), Citations per faculty (20%), International Faculty Ratio (5%), International Student Ratio (5%).

The parameters and their corresponding weights are outlined below:

Academic Reputation (40%): Academic reputation reflects how a university is perceived by academic peers in terms of teaching and research excellence. It accounts for 40% of the total score and is typically measured through global surveys completed by experienced scholars. High academic reputation suggests the institution produces impactful research and quality graduates. It enhances the university's ability to attract elite faculty, students, and funding. This per-

ception is shaped by scholarly output, thought leadership, and contributions to global academic discourse.

Employer Reputation (10%): Employer reputation gauges how well graduates meet labor market needs, making up 10% of the total score. It is assessed through surveys of employers across industries who rank institutions based on graduate performance, skills, and adaptability. A strong employer reputation indicates that a university prepares students effectively for the workforce. It reflects practical curriculum relevance, internship opportunities, and alumni success. This metric is crucial for prospective students seeking a return on their educational investment and for strengthening university-industry ties.

Faculty/Student Ratio (20%): This metric assesses academic support by evaluating the number of faculty relative to students, contributing 20% to the score. A lower ratio suggests smaller classes and greater individual attention, enhancing student learning and satisfaction. It reflects the institution's commitment to maintaining quality instruction and manageable faculty workloads. A strong ratio benefits research supervision and classroom interaction. Universities with favorable ratios tend to offer better academic guidance, improve outcomes, and create a more supportive and engaging learning environment.

Citations per Faculty (20%): Citations per faculty measure the average number of research citations per academic staff member, representing 20% of the score. It indicates research quality, impact, and visibility. Higher citation counts suggest influential work recognized by the global academic community. This metric highlights an institution's contribution to knowledge creation and innovation. It also enhances its ability to attract research funding, build partnerships, and recruit talented faculty. Citations reflect not only productivity but also the relevance and credibility of scholarly outputs.

International Faculty Ratio (5%): The international faculty ratio, worth 5% of the score, reflects a university's ability to attract academic staff from other countries. It signifies global appeal, diversity, and international collaboration. International faculty contribute to a richer educational experience by bringing diverse perspectives, global networks, and research expertise. Their presence supports cross-cultural understanding and enhances institutional prestige. A high ratio also suggests openness to global academic standards and helps build international research partnerships, further positioning the university on the world stage.

International Student Ratio (5%): This indicator, accounting for 5% of the score, measures the proportion of students from outside the host country. It reflects the university's international appeal and inclusiveness. A high international student ratio indicates strong global recognition and cultural diversity on campus. These students enrich academic dialogue, contribute to a global

learning environment, and support institutional revenue. The metric also suggests robust support systems for international students, including services for integration and academic success, enhancing the university's global image and competitiveness.

Diversification of University Rankings

In the last ten years, global university rankings have seen diversity and innovation. In particular, the education sector has seen the introduction of a number of new rankings in recent years, with differences in approach and evaluation criteria that focus on things like academic achievement, innovation, and internationalization. But the majority of ranking agencies news worthy global rankings, such as the QS (Quacquarelli Symonds Limited) World University Rankings, the Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE), and the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU, also known as Shanghai rankings), consider research with many citations for published publications to be a crucial indicator in the evaluation process (Khan et al., 2020). Table 1 lists existing global university rankings inclusive of their origins, established years, and methodologies.

Table 1. Types of rankings

Ranking	Origin	Methodology / Indicators
Academic Ranking of World Universities	Shanghai Ranking Consultancy, China	-No: of published articles (Nature or Science) -Fields Medalists (mathematics) -No: of Nobel Prize winners
Times Higher Education World University Rankings **Times Higher Education World Reputation Rankings** **Young University Rankings**	Times Higher Education (THE), UK	Five groups of performance indicators: -Research (volume, income and reputation) -Teaching (the learning environment) -Citations (research influence) -Industry income (knowledge transfer) - International outlook (staff, research and students)
QS World University Rankings **QS Asian University Rankings** **QS Latin American University Rankings**	Quacquarelli Symonds, UK	Five indicators: - Academic peer review - International staff ratio -International student ratio - Citations per faculty - Employer reputation & Faculty/ Student ratio
Center for World University Rankings	the Center for World University Rankings, Suadi	- Quality of education -Scientific impact -Number of publications - Number of publications in high-quality journals - Citations - Alumni employment - Number of patents - Quality of faculty

U.S. News & World Report's Best Global Universities Rankings U.S. News & World Report, USA Judging by factors such as:

- Publications
- Global research reputation
- Number of highly cited papers

Webometrics Cybermetrics Lab, Spain Based on a composite indicator that considers both the volume of the Web contents (number of web pages and files) and the visibility and impact of these web publications according to the number of external

World University Rankings

The landscape of education in the 21st century is viewed as increasingly focused on market dynamics and competition, with international rankings playing a crucial and unavoidable role (Hazelkorn, 2015). The effects of globalization are felt in various regions, nations, and cultures, and the realm of higher education has not been immune to these influences. Consequently, significant transformations have taken place in the higher education landscape recently, highlighting a clear and noticeable demand for global competitiveness and completeness. Aligned with the trends of globalization and the rise of the worldwide knowledge economy, these competitive dynamics foster global evaluations and comparisons (Khan et al., 2020). The importance of global university rankings has gained widespread acknowledgment, serving as a means to assess the quality and competitiveness of higher education in the academic marketplace. Currently, these rankings have emerged as pivotal gatekeepers in higher education, determining what and whom to evaluate, as well as the depth of such assessments.

Ethical Concerns of Global University Rankings

The implications of global university rankings can be viewed through the lens of ethical ideas. For instance, a practical viewpoint would judge rankings on their ability to maximize overall educational benefit. Rankings may be justifiable if they result in higher quality, accessibility, and creativity. But if they cause harm like inequality, stress, or a loss of mission integrity, their moral legitimacy is diminished (Lloyd & Ordorika, 2021).

A deontological approach would ask whether ranking practices respect the rights and dignity of all stakeholders, including students, instructors, and communities. Rankings violate ethical obligations regardless of the outcome if they lead to unfair treatment, misrepresentation, or coercive policies. The character and objectives of institutions would be the primary focus of a virtue ethics framework. Do universities foster virtues like honesty, integrity, and knowledge, or do they encourage vanity, manipulation, and rivalry just for the sake of it? This method highlights the critical role that leadership and institutional culture play in negotiating the ethical minefield of rankings (Stademann, 2023).

The perception, actions, and policies of higher education are influenced by global university rankings at several levels (Stack, 2016). They provide opportunities for visibility and benchmarking, but they also present significant ethical dilemmas. In institutional decision-making, it emphasizes moral thought, reaffirms the public purpose of education, and calls for a reevaluation of what excellence is. It is essential

that rankings act as instruments for improvement, not as goals in themselves, as the global education landscape continues to change

While global university rankings aim to encourage competition and accountability, they also bring up ethical issues related to the potential for metric manipulation, an emphasis on research at the expense of other educational elements, and a decline in academic freedom (Brink, 2024). Additionally, these rankings may push universities to prioritize their marketing efforts over the quality of education, resulting in a distorted portrayal of institutional value. Ultimately, striving for high rankings can compromise educational integrity and mislead students in their decision-making processes by altering their understanding of what defines a quality education (Karmaeva & Kanonire, 2017).

Manipulation of Metrics: Institutions may be tempted to exaggerate figures such as faculty-student ratios, the number of international students, or publication statistics in certain journals to boost their rankings, even though such actions may not indicate any real enhancement in quality. This tendency can shift the focus toward superficial successes rather than authentic academic merit (Dakowska, 2013).

Bias towards Research: Several rankings give precedence to research output and its impact, frequently disregarding other essential educational components like teaching effectiveness, student services, and the transfer of knowledge. As a result, there can be an overly narrow concentration on research, which detracts from other critical areas (Kehm, 2020).

Compromise of Academic Autonomy: The drive to sustain a top ranking can hinder innovative teaching practices, research pursuits, and academic discussions if they do not match the metrics used for rankings. This pressure can result in a uniform academic culture and limit intellectual exploration (Kohvakka & Nevala, 2023).

Marketing over Quality: Colleges may lean toward marketing strategies to enhance their rankings, rather than concentrating on real advancements in teaching and research quality. Such an approach can create an inaccurate view of an institution's value and mislead students in their choices (Platis, 2017).

Harmful Competition: These rankings can foster a competitive atmosphere that might not support collaboration and knowledge exchange. A focus on individual institutional triumph can overshadow the shared objectives of higher education and the global academic landscape (Brink, 2024).

Distorted Student Decision-Making: Students may base their decisions on rankings instead of their individual learning needs and preferences, which could result in mismatches between theirs and the institutions. Furthermore, these rankings might cultivate a misleading hierarchy among universities,

potentially deterring students from attending schools that may better cater to their unique requirements (Karmaeva & Kanonire, 2017).

Transparency and Openness: Ranking systems need to be clear about their methodologies and criteria, enabling institutions and stakeholders to grasp how the rankings are determined and what factors are prioritized (Hägg & Wedlin, 2013)

Focus on Holistic Evaluation: Rankings should reflect a wider range of indicators, including the quality of teaching, student assistance, knowledge dissemination, and community involvement, rather than being limited to research outputs (Karmaeva & Kanonire, 2017).

Student-Centered Approach: Students need to understand the constraints of rankings and should be motivated to choose based on their personal requirements and desires, instead of depending only on those rankings (Karmaeva & Kanonire, 2017).

By tackling these moral issues and fostering a more well-rounded and open method to rankings, applying frameworks such as Rawlsian justice and care ethics to ranking practices reveals a moral imperative to prioritize fairness, inclusion, and contextual sensitivity over competitive self-interest. Higher education can guarantee that rankings act as a beneficial resource for growth and creativity instead of a means of deceit and damage.

Critical Perspectives and Institutional Responses to Ranking Paradigms

The ethical and pedagogical shortcomings of global rankings are becoming more widely recognized, leading to the development of several counter-movements and criticisms. These programs frequently come from academic circles, policy think tanks, or socially responsible organizations that are dedicated to the long-term well-being of higher education systems (Hauptman Komotar, 2021).

The European University Association (EUA) is one of the most outspoken detractors, claiming that ranking systems do not capture the variety of institutional goals. The majority of rankings, according to EUA reports, are designed for research-intensive universities, ignoring those that emphasize community involvement, instructional quality, or regional development. This critique refutes the idea that a single ranking standard can be used across different educational settings (Ezema, 2023).

Ranking Pressures and Faculty Autonomy

One aspect of the ranking debate that is often missed is how institutional pressures impact faculty members' academic freedom and autonomy. Universities may push professors to publish in high-impact journals, frequently those that are Western-based and in English, regardless of their discipline, language, or intended audience, in an attempt to improve their institutional image (Bergman & Faghri, 2024).

The effects of this pressure may include the following:

Diluting local significance: Faculty members may increasingly prioritize research topics that align with global citation trends and international journal standards, often at the expense of locally relevant issues. This shift can marginalize community-based research, diminish the societal impact of academic work, and weaken the institution's role in addressing local challenges.

Ethical breaches: Faculty members may have incentives to engage in unethical conduct in order to increase their publication output, such as manipulating data, salami-slicing of research, or honorary authorship. These dynamics erode academic integrity, jeopardize the objective of research, and erode public confidence in educational institutions. Thus, rankings are not ethically neutral; rather, they actively alter the values and priorities of academic research, frequently in ways that contradict the educational objective.

Global South Perspectives

Global ranking systems, which are implicitly designed with Western norms in mind, frequently place universities in the Global South at a disadvantage. For example, several rankings heavily rely on articles published in high-impact journals that are indexed in databases like Scopus or Web of Science. Regardless of their local influence or scholarly rigor, however, many academic journals from Africa, Latin America, and sections of Asia are left out of these indexes (Achugbue & Tella, 2023).

Worldwide university rankings may undermine local cultures, histories, and methods of learning while strengthening the dominance of Western epistemologies. As a result, the discussion of rankings must also include a global justice perspective, addressing not just inequality of access but also inequality of recognition.

AI, Big Data, and the Future of Rankings

New technologies, especially big data analysis and artificial intelligence (AI), are likely to transform the methods used to assess universities. These tools provide the possibility for more active, real-time evaluations across a wider array of factors,

such as social impact, sustainability efforts, student contentment, and digital involvement. Nevertheless, incorporating AI into ranking systems, if undertaken without well-defined ethical guidelines, may strengthen current inequalities and create new types of algorithmic monitoring and institutional control (Jugulum et al., 2025).

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The discourse surrounding global university rankings has increased dramatically over the past two decades, especially in connection to their impact on academic ethics, institutional conduct, and higher education policy. The effect of rankings on equity, quality assurance, institutional independence, and educational integrity has been critically examined in academic writings, bringing up significant ethical questions. This section summarizes the field's major theoretical and empirical contributions, highlighting how the current literature supports or refutes the idea that university rankings create a conflict between competition and ethical academic principles (Yudkevich et al., 2016).

The Expanding Scope and Impact of World Rankings

The expansion of international university rankings has, according to Uslu (2018), caused a paradigm change in higher education, shifting its focus from the public good to market-driven competition. Universities have been compelled to seek metrics-based performance, frequently at the cost of educational diversity and contextual relevance, due to the dominance of systems like Times Higher Education (THE), QS World University Rankings, and the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU). A prominent expert in higher education policy, Safón (2019), highlights how rankings have evolved into a means of institutional conformity as well as a means of global status, advising institutions to replicate the methods of the top-ranked ones irrespective of their national or cultural significance. Rankings also influence policy choices, as governments and funding organizations use them as proxies for quality assurance and accountability, according to Hazelkorn (2016), the widespread use of rankings as policy instruments has raised questions about their methodological validity and the possibility of misrepresenting institutional missions.

Critiques of methodology and ethics

The way that ranking systems are built has been the subject of criticism from many academics. Research output, international faculty, citation indices, and other metrics commonly used are frequently restricted, Eurocentric, and do not reflect

the diversity of institutions. Figueira & Nascimento (2022), ethically emphasize the concept of "reactivity," in which institutions modify their conduct in order to rank higher rather than to enhance education. Their empirical research on law school rankings shows how these performance pressures result in strategic actions that erode integrity, such as altering acceptance standards or gaming job numbers. Additionally, Soudien (2021), emphasizes how ranking systems reinforce a hegemonic knowledge system that marginalizes alternative epistemologies and exacerbates inequality between universities in the Global North and South.

Institutional Behavior and Strategic Manipulation

Institutional strategies have been greatly impacted by global university rankings, which frequently result in actions intended at boosting rankings rather than raising the standard of education. Dunrong (2016), describe how colleges can use methods like changing data submissions or highlighting metrics that ranking systems prefer in order to rise in the rankings. This conduct may endanger institutional integrity and divert attention away from essential instructional objectives.

The possibility of data manipulation in order to improve rankings is demonstrated by the example of Columbia University. For instance, in 2022, Columbia University was accused of inflating class size and faculty credential data to secure a higher U.S. News ranking. The revelation prompted internal audits and led to a reassessment of the university's institutional priorities, highlighting the reputational risks associated with manipulating metrics. When schools choose rankings above transparency and honesty, they encounter moral quandaries that are brought to light by occurrences like this (Kehm, 2020).

Biases in Rankings Due to Culture and Geography

Global university rankings have also been criticized for their inherent cultural and geographic biases. Hazelkorn (2016), contends that rankings unfairly favor Western, English-speaking universities, thereby marginalizing those from non-English-speaking and developing nations. This prejudice affects not just how people worldwide view these organizations, but also the potential for funding and cooperation.

University rankings frequently fall short of reflecting the particular advantages and contributions of schools in the African setting. Rankings, according to the South African Private Higher Education (SAPHE) blog, often ignore important aspects of African universities' missions, such as community participation, instructional quality, and the preservation of indigenous knowledge. This mistake perpetuates inequalities and undermines the diverse goals of higher education throughout various areas.

Influence on Academic Freedom and Research Diversity

Rankings that place a strong emphasis on particular metrics might restrict academic freedom and reduce the variety of research. As stated by Hazelkorn, (2024), the pressure to publish in high-impact journals and obtain research grants can lead academics to prioritize some research fields over others, perhaps ignoring significant but less "rank-friendly" subjects. This interaction has the potential to suppress innovation and discourage research that is interdisciplinary or pertinent to the community.

Impact on student choices and accessibility

Because university rankings have a big impact on students' decisions, they often choose highly ranked colleges without giving any thought to program quality or personal compatibility. Kanonire (2017), stresses that students may overlook elements that are essential to a positive educational experience, such as the caliber of instruction, the campus environment, and available support services. This concentration on rankings may also worsen access concerns because highly rated institutions may become more selective, which restricts chances for students from marginalized or underprivileged backgrounds. The subsequent stratification of higher education can perpetuate societal inequities and impede initiatives to increase diversity and inclusion.

The Impact of Media and Public Opinion

Kelchen (2021) noted that, rankings can have a greater impact if their findings are widely publicized, even if the methods and consequences are not given a thorough examination. In addition, the media may contribute to the commodification of education by portraying universities as commodities to be ranked and selected. This viewpoint diminishes the intrinsic worth of education as well as the varied goals of higher education institutions.

According to Noreen & Hussain (2019), the global university ranking literature provides a comprehensive and intricate perspective. Rankings have methodological flaws and ethical ramifications that are cause for significant worry, even though they offer comparative data that might inspire institutional progress. Rankings, according to scholars, transform institutional conduct, exacerbate inequalities, and commodify education. Simultaneously, novel frameworks, such as social justice theory, capability approaches, and pluralistic ranking systems, provide alternative routes toward more equitable and ethical evaluation methods.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SOLUTIONS

To address the ethical concerns surrounding international university rankings, it is imperative to reconsider the way institutional success is measured and promoted across the academic community. One of the main suggestions is to change and improve the methods used by rating firms. These methods frequently rely excessively on quantifiable indicators, which do not adequately represent the wide range of tasks and ideals of higher education establishments. For example, community involvement, equity, student well-being, and teaching quality are frequently ignored factors, but they are important measures of an institution's integrity. Ranking systems that include more holistic and qualitative measures may provide a fairer assessment. Ethical rankings could incorporate metrics that evaluate student well-being, commitment to sustainability, community service impact, and support for marginalized groups dimensions currently absent from dominant frameworks. of educational institutions, especially those whose goals go beyond research results and global exposure.

Furthermore, ranking methods must give top priority to transparency and accountability. Many ranking organizations operate under opaque conditions, leaving stakeholders unsure of how scores are calculated and what those rankings actually indicate. Ranking organizations should be open about their methodologies, data sources, and weighting schemes in order to promote trust and integrity. Additional measures, such as audits and independent reviews, may help guarantee that ranking processes are fair, consistent, and not subject to manipulation. Institutions themselves have a role to play by adopting ethical frameworks that resist the urge to manipulate statistics for the sake of improving rank. Instead of chasing quick wins through superficial indicators, university leaders should concentrate on their fundamental principles and long-term academic objectives.

Promoting alternative and context-sensitive evaluation models is just as crucial. Initiatives like the “More Than Our Rank” campaign and U-Multirank are examples of attempts to change the way institutional quality is evaluated. These models allow institutions to define success in accordance with their own distinct goals and to emphasize accomplishments in areas like social justice, sustainability, inclusion, and access. Governments and educational groups should support such programs and establish legislation that lessen the excessive reliance on conventional rankings for funding, accreditation, and policymaking. A variety of criteria, not just a institution's ranking in a worldwide list, should be used to determine institutional excellence.

Additionally, instructional stakeholders must recognize the inequality that traditional ranking systems produce, particularly the marginalization of institutions in the Global South. Universities in well-resourced, English-speaking nations are frequently ranked higher, which leads to the exclusion of important indigenous knowledge systems and non-Western educational models. Addressing this imbalance calls for

conscious steps to include culturally diverse indicators in ranking methodologies and to promote the visibility of academic publications in regional languages and contexts. Rather than just focusing on how well institutions in emerging countries align with Western-centric standards, their contributions to local development and community impact should be assessed.

New moral dilemmas are also brought up by technological breakthroughs, notably in big data and artificial intelligence. These tools have the potential to enhance the depth and scope of institutional assessments, but they also run the danger of fostering surveillance-like techniques and supporting biases. Ethical protections must be implemented as ranking systems become more and more dependent on algorithmic data analysis in order to protect data privacy, equity, and informed consent. In order to create data justice frameworks that regulate the use of new technologies in education assessment, institutions and ranking organizations should work with ethicists and policymakers.

Media literacy and public understanding need to be improved. In particular, potential students and their families should be able to approach rankings with a critical eye. University rankings can be transformed from tools of competition and commodification into valuable resources for educational development and equity through collective, ethical, and systemic reform. Educational initiatives can teach readers about what rankings do and do not measure, fostering decision-making that is informed by a comprehensive understanding of institutional values, learning environments, and student results.

STRENGTHS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

The moral consequences of global university rankings are examined in this work in a critical and multifaceted manner. Its capacity to integrate complicated ethical ideas with actual institutional conduct, thereby bridging the divide between normative ethics and educational practice, is one of its main strengths. By engaging with frameworks such as deontology, consequentialism, and virtue ethics, the study lays a strong ethical groundwork for analyzing the unintentional effects of rankings. By doing this, it emphasizes both the technical shortcomings of ranking procedures and the underlying moral contradictions of the current culture of education that is driven by competition. It also incorporates underrepresented perspectives, notably those from organizations in the Global South, which is another benefit. The study contributes to ongoing discussions regarding decolonization, cultural hegemony, and

global equality in higher education by emphasizing how dominant ranking systems marginalize non-Western institutions and epistemologies.

Furthermore, the analysis is strengthened by its consideration of future technologies, particularly artificial intelligence and big data, and how they might affect ranking methods. As education systems become more and more digital, this forward-thinking strategy is essential. It highlights the necessity of ethical data governance and predicts future levels of complexity that are likely to have an impact on how institutions are rated and viewed. The study's commitment to finding solutions rather than merely pointing out flaws is further demonstrated by its inclusion of counter-movements and alternate ranking models. It identifies and analyzes developing frameworks, such the "More Than Our Rank" initiative, U-Multirank, and capability-based assessments, which emphasize student agency, inclusion, and civic participation.

There are, however, constraints that need to be recognized. The majority of the study is theoretical and heavily dependent on literature reviews, institutional reports, and secondary sources. Although this gives a broad analytical perspective, it lacks empirical support from firsthand sources like interviews, surveys, or institutional case studies. This limits the capacity to record real-life experiences of students, professors, and administrators who deal with the pressures of rankings in their everyday academic and professional lives. In the future, this gap may be filled via ethnographic techniques, comparative institutional analyses, or participatory action research that places the voices of those most impacted by ranking systems at the forefront.

Furthermore, even though the research criticizes the Western-centric aspect of global rankings, it might gain from a greater focus on indigenous knowledge systems and localized educational values, especially those that are not included in the conventional university model. For instance, the impact of ranking discourses on community colleges, vocational schools, and adult education institutions is still an open and understudied topic. More investigation into how these different educational organizations could be incorporated into fairer assessment frameworks is a promising avenue for future research.

The effect of rankings on students' identities, mental health, and career choices also needs to be studied more carefully. Because ranking data is mostly consumed by students, it's crucial to comprehend how these systems influence their aspirations and path. The psychological and social consequences of ranking exposure, especially for marginalized and first-generation students, might be the subject of future research. To fully comprehend and tackle the intricate dynamics surrounding global university rankings, more empirical, context-driven, and intersectional research is ultimately required, even though this study provides a crucial ethical and theoretical framework.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, global university rankings offers visibility, benchmarks, and motivation for improvement, while simultaneously introducing ethical tensions that challenge the foundational values of education. They shape not only how universities are perceived but also how they function, incentivizing behavior that can prioritize prestige over purpose.

This chapter has demonstrated that dominant ranking systems often reinforce narrow values such as research output and global reputation, while neglecting vital dimensions like social equity, educational integrity, and local engagement. As a result, institutions in the Global South and non-Western contexts are frequently disadvantaged, and students may be misled into equating institutional worth with position on a list.

Yet, this trajectory is not irreversible. Reform is not only necessary it is feasible. Universities must resist the urge to manipulate metrics and instead anchor their strategies in ethical principles. Ranking agencies should expand their frameworks to include metrics that measure inclusivity, student well-being, sustainability, and public good. Policymakers should move beyond over-reliance on rankings for funding and accreditation purposes.

A shared commitment to ethical evaluation is crucial. Stakeholders can redefine excellence through values of diversity, justice, and transparency. By embracing holistic, ethical, and context-sensitive approaches to assessment, the global academic community can ensure that rankings evolve into tools that uplift rather than undermine the true mission of higher education. Hence, only then can this move from a system driven by prestige to one guided by purpose where education serves humanity, nurtures character, and cultivates knowledge in service of the common good.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Academic Integrity: Refers to the commitment of educational institutions and individuals to uphold ethical standards in teaching, learning, and research. In the context of this chapter, academic integrity is at risk when universities alter priorities or manipulate data to improve rankings, undermining their true educational missions (Teddi' Fishman, 2016).

Global University Rankings: Ranking systems that assess and order higher education institutions based on standardized performance indicators such as research output, faculty credentials, internationalization, and citations. Major examples include the QS World University Rankings, Times Higher Education (THE), and the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) (Stack, 2016).

Ranking Metrics: Quantifiable criteria used by ranking organizations to compare institutions globally. These typically include factors like citation rates, publication counts, faculty-to-student ratios, international staff and students, and employer reputation. The chapter critiques how such metrics can oversimplify complex academic qualities (Gorman & Huber, 2022).

Virtue Ethics: An ethical theory focusing on the character and moral virtues of individuals or institutions. The chapter uses this framework to question whether rankings cultivate virtues like honesty and social responsibility, or instead promote vanity, competition, and strategic manipulation (Okpo, 2019).

Chapter 9
The Influence of Rankings on the Mental Health of Instructional Staff and Students

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ABSTRACT

Rankings in higher education have become an essential tool for evaluating institutions, programs, and individuals. Their function as a mentor for prospective students and faculty is occasionally underestimated regarding psychological impact. This chapter analyzes the psychological effects of rankings on students and instructors, highlighting motivation, stress, and mental health. It analyzes the influence of rankings on students' academic aspirations and self-esteem, as well as the pressures they place on instructors about career progression and performance. The chapter analyzes the psychological consequences while highlighting the institutional viewpoint, exploring the impact of rankings on resource distribution and institutional decision-making.

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Furthermore, it analyzes coping mechanisms and support techniques to alleviate the negative effects. The chapter concludes with considerations regarding the future of rankings in higher education and their capacity to foster a more inclusive and holistic academic atmosphere.

1. INTRODUCTION

Global higher education has been profoundly impacted by rankings, which have emerged as a formidable influence in recent decades. A variety of national and international rating systems have evolved as credible sources (*Hazelkorn, 2018; Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012*; *Lillo Cea, 2024*). Examples of these ranking systems include the QS World University Rankings, Times Higher Education (THE), and India's National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF). These rating systems influence perceptions of educational quality, institutional prestige, and employability outcomes *(Qamar, 2024)*. Initially conceived as tools for evaluating institutional performance and promoting transparency, these rankings have developed to have considerable influence over public perception, financing decisions, and the strategic trajectories of universities *(Rubio et al., 2024).*

Rankings have transitioned from conventional indications of institutional effectiveness to personal metrics that profoundly influence the daily actions of students and staff members. During the selection of colleges, programs, and countries for higher education, rankings often act as a reference for students *(Shehata, 2024)*. Individuals frequently perceive a prestigious school as a hallmark of excellence, as it is thought to provide superior education, enhanced career prospects, and increased avenues for social mobility. Faculty members, conversely, experience a distinct form of pressure that is equally acute. University rankings are progressively considering research output, citations, student-faculty ratios, and internationalization, all of which are significant factors sometimes intimately associated with the duties and obligations of faculty members *(Krishna et al., 2025).* This creates a work culture that prioritizes quantitative performance above qualitative engagement, thereby impacting faculty members' career advancement, promotion, and recognition chances.

The psychological impact of rankings on primary stakeholders—students and faculty—is often undervalued, even though ranking systems are intended to promote success. Students in esteemed educational institutions may encounter significant pressure to sustain high academic performance, leading to chronic stress, anxiety, and an obsession with the prospect of failure *(Chemagosi, 2024)*. Conversely, individuals attending lower-ranked universities may experience social stigma, feelings of inferiority, and reduced self-esteem. Similarly, faculty members may engage in an incessant race to publish their research, secure funding, and meet performance

metrics aligned with ranking criteria *(Kayyali, 2023).* A decline in intrinsic motivation, a reduction in job satisfaction, and a deterioration in collegiality within departments are all possible consequences of this pressure.

The aim of this chapter is to analyze these psychological features in greater depth. This study aims to analyze the emotional and cognitive effects of the contemporary ranking culture on the academic identities, motivations, and mental health of students and academics. Furthermore, it aims to highlight the operations of institutions motivated by rankings and the unforeseen consequences these practices may elicit. This chapter advocates for a reassessment of the definitions and evaluations of academic accomplishment. It is essential to balance the pursuit of excellence with the creation of a supportive, inclusive, and psychologically sustainable academic environment, as academic well-being is increasingly recognized as a fundamental aspect of institutional success. This chapter examines the challenges posed by rankings and offers several strategies and frameworks to cultivate a healthier academic ecosystem and mitigate the adverse effects of rankings.

2. UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF RANKINGS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In the swiftly changing and competitive realm of global education, university rankings have become crucial metrics that inform institutional objectives, direct student choices, and impact faculty advancement *(Alanazi, 2024).* Rankings not only indicate institutional performance but also convey reputation and perceived quality to global stakeholders. As higher education increasingly adopts a market-driven approach, comprehending the mechanisms and ramifications of these rankings is vital for administrators, students, and academic personnel (Jha, 2025). This section explores the principles of rankings, delineates prominent ranking frameworks, and assesses their influence on the decision-making processes of students and professors.

2.1 Definition and Explanation of Rankings

Higher education rankings are systematic assessments that evaluate and compare institutions based on several performance factors, including academic excellence, research output, faculty qualifications, teaching effectiveness, student outcomes, and international participation *(Vernon et al., 2018)*. These rankings seek to streamline the decision-making process for stakeholders by distilling voluminous data into measurable indicators, frequently displayed as league tables or percentile ranges

(Fernandes & Singh, 2022). The aim is to provide a comprehensible, comparative analysis of institutional performance in relation to each other.

Nonetheless, although rankings can provide significant insights, their techniques frequently differ considerably, and they may neglect the contextual and qualitative factors that characterize educational quality *(Shin & Toutkoushian, 2011)*. Numerous rating organizations depend on a combination of factual metrics (such faculty-student ratios, research citations, and graduation rates) and subjective evaluations (such as academic reputation surveys). This amalgamation may engender bias, particularly favoring affluent or historically esteemed institutions. Furthermore, rankings frequently emphasize research productivity at the expense of teaching quality, potentially distorting institutional objectives from pedagogical advancement to the volume of publications *(Barari et al., 2024, Bello et al., 2023)*. Although valuable for emphasizing strengths and pinpointing areas for enhancement, rankings should be seen as merely one of several instruments for assessing institutional effectiveness, rather than as definitive measures of quality.

2.2 Commonly Used Ranking Systems (e.g., QS, Times Higher Education, NIRF)

There are several different ranking systems in use around the world, each with its own methodology and focus areas. Academic reputation, employer reputation, faculty-student ratio, citations per faculty, international faculty ratio, and international student ratio are the six main variables used by Quacquarelli Symonds to generate the QS World University Rankings *(Universities, 2011)*. The focus on academic and employer reputation—gathered through comprehensive surveys—makes QS particularly sensitive to perceived distinction in both academic and professional fields.

Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings, conversely, prioritize research and teaching with greater balance. Their concept encompasses pedagogy (learning environment), scholarship (volume, revenue, and prestige), citations (research impact), global perspective (staff, students, and research), and industry revenue (knowledge transfer). THE methodology is frequently considered more research-intensive and objective, yet it still incorporates aspects of subjective opinion *(Hazelkorn, 2014)*. Table 1 Represents a comparative analysis of prominent ranking frameworks including QS, Times Higher Education, and NIRF, highlighting their methodologies, metrics, and geographic influence.

Table 1. Major Ranking Systems and Their Methodologies

Ranking System	Primary Focus Areas	Key Metrics	Geographic Influence
QS World University Rankings	Academic & employer reputation	Academic reputation (40%), Employer reputation (10%), Faculty-student ratio (20%), Citations per faculty (20%), International faculty/student ratio (10%)	Global
Times Higher Education (THE)	Research & teaching	Teaching (30%), Research (30%), Citations (30%), International outlook (7.5%), Industry income (2.5%)	Global
National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF)	Teaching, research, inclusivity	Teaching, Learning & Resources (30%), Research & Professional Practice (30%), Graduation Outcomes (20%), Outreach & Inclusivity (10%), Perception (10%)	India
Academic Ranking of World Universities (Shanghai)	Research output	Quality of faculty, research output, per capita performance	Global
U.S. News & World Report	Educational outcomes	Graduation rates, retention rates, peer assessment, faculty resources	United States

In India, the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), established by the Ministry of Education, is essential for assessing universities nationally. The NIRF evaluates universities based on five fundamental criteria: Teaching, Learning and Resources (TLR); Research and Professional Practice (RP); Graduation Outcomes (GO); Outreach and Inclusivity (OI); and Perception (PR) *(Hebbale et al., 2024)*. NIRF prioritizes accessibility, inclusivity, and regional balance, providing a contextually pertinent perspective for Indian stakeholders, in contrast to other worldwide rankings. It is progressively utilized by students, teachers, and policy-makers to assess institutional performance within India's extensive and varied higher education landscape *(Wadhwa, 2024).*

These ranking systems, albeit beneficial, possess specific limitations. Their influence is determined by the accessibility and caliber of data, which may differ among locations and institutions. The pre-eminence of English-language research in databases utilized by ranking organizations may harm non-Western schools. Consequently, stakeholders must engage with rankings with critical awareness and comprehension of the methodology utilized *(Ezechieli, 2003).*

2.3 The Role of Rankings in Decision-Making for Students and Faculty

Rankings significantly influence the decisions of students and professors, frequently acting as a preliminary filter or validation mechanism in the selection of an institution. For students—particularly those investigating overseas prospects or

seeking high-yield educational investments—rankings provide a rapid means of comparing universities across various countries or regions *(Lam & Chen, 2022).* A prestigious university is often linked to superior infrastructure, international exposure, extensive alumni networks, and enhanced employment opportunities, hence increasing its appeal. Consequently, universities with superior rankings may receive a greater number of applications, enabling them to exercise increased selectivity and thereby solidifying their elite status *(Hall, 2011).*

This dependence on rankings can lead to psychological effects for students, who may equate the prestige of their institution with their own value or future achievements. Students at lower-tier colleges may have feelings of inadequacy, whilst those in prestigious institutions may encounter significant pressure to maintain the institution's reputation through outstanding academic achievement. This perception-based motivation can both excite and burden students, affecting their academic decisions, emotional well-being, and self-esteem *(Baker & Velez, 1996).*

Rankings have an impact on faculty members' professional reputation, career opportunities, and paths to promotion. To market themselves and draw in prestigious professors who can boost their research output and reputation, universities use rankings as a criterion (*Stack, 2020)*. As a result, academics could feel pressured to focus on activities that meet ranking criteria, such getting research funding, publishing in esteemed journals, or strengthening global collaborations. Even while these goals align with academic progress, they can occasionally jeopardize the standard of mentoring, instruction, and academic autonomy *(O'Meara & Bloomgarden, 2011)*. Furthermore, especially at institutions that are ardently seeking rank advancements, instructors may feel more pressure or competition.

In both instances, the need to excel according to ranking metrics may result in adverse effects, such as academic burnout, strategic data manipulation by institutions, and a transition in institutional values from comprehensive education to metric-driven results *(Dill & Soo, 2005)*. Consequently, although rankings significantly impact decision-making, they should be augmented with qualitative evaluations and contextual insights to facilitate comprehensive and durable academic experiences.

Understanding the fundamentals and workings of higher education rankings is essential, as is their profound impact on academic decisions and conduct. Rankings provide visibility and benchmarking, but they can also limit performance incentives and increase competitive pressures. Institutional strategy and individual goals are affected by rankings, both national (like NIRF) and international (like QS and THE) *(NK et al., 2018)*. They must be carefully examined, but with restrictions, in order to support rather than interfere with academic decision-making. As higher education develops, a measured approach to rankings can help organizations and individuals balance ambition with sustainability and authenticity.

3. PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF RANKINGS ON STUDENTS

Institutional rankings significantly impact not only administrative initiatives and marketing narratives but also profoundly affect students' perceptions. For numerous students, the ranking of their college or university serves not just as an indicator of institutional distinction but also as a representation of their academic identity and social standing *(Marginson, 2009)*. This perception, frequently formed during the admission period, persists in influencing their motivation, self-esteem, and psychological well-being throughout their academic experience. This section analyzes the influence of institutional rankings on student conduct, stress levels, and performance, providing insights into the psychological toll of a ranking-focused academic environment. Overview of the contrasting positive and negative psychological effects experienced by students and faculty at institutions of varying ranking status is visualised in Table 2.

3.1 Student Motivation and Perception

Institutional rankings frequently act as motivational standards for students, shaping their academic ambitions and personal objectives. Students accepted into prestigious colleges frequently express heightened motivation, gaining a sense of pride and affirmation from the institution's esteemed reputation *(Gardner & Veliz, 2014)*. This may result in enhanced engagement with academic work, involvement in extracurricular activities, and an initiative-driven approach to job advancement. Nonetheless, such rankings may cultivate elitism, engendering the belief that students from lower-ranked institutions are intrinsically less competent or driven, thereby diminishing self-esteem and intellectual confidence *(Trevisan, 2022)*.

The psychological effects of these views are particularly pronounced in intensely competitive educational settings. Students may perceive their institution's ranking as a reflection of their academic worth, resulting in internalized pressure to meet an expected standard of excellence *(Deci & Ryan, 2002)*. In contrast, individuals attending lower-ranked colleges may encounter diminished motivation, disenchantment, or sentiments of intellectual inadequacy. These beliefs may not consistently correspond with reality, yet they can significantly affect how students assess themselves and their academic endeavors. Consequently, rankings can both motivate and demoralize, contingent upon the student's standing within the imagined academic hierarchy.

Table 2. Psychological Effects of Rankings on Key Stakeholders

Stakeholder	Positive Psychological Effects	Negative Psychological Effects
Students in high-ranked institutions	Enhanced pride and motivation, Sense of accomplishment, Increased self-confidence, Higher career aspirations	Performance anxiety, Fear of failure, Impostor syndrome, Competitive stress, Unhealthy perfectionism
Students in lower-ranked institutions	Motivation to prove themselves, Realistic expectations, Less pressure to conform	Diminished self-esteem, Academic inferiority feelings, Reduced academic aspirations, Social stigma
Faculty in high-ranked institutions	Professional validation, Research opportunities, Prestige in academic community	Publication pressure, Work-life imbalance, Reduced teaching focus, Constant evaluation anxiety
Faculty in lower-ranked institutions	Teaching focus, Community engagement opportunities, More academic freedom	Career advancement concerns, Resource limitations, Professional isolation, Reduced recognition
Administrators	Strategic direction, Benchmarking tools, Resource allocation guidance	Resource allocation pressure, Short-term focus, Mission drift, Decision-making constraints

3.2 Impact on Mental Health and Stress Levels

As rankings increasingly define institutional identity, students frequently absorb the responsibility to sustain or elevate their institution's standing through personal success. This emerges as different forms of psychological stress, including anxiety around grades and performance, as well as sadness resulting from perceived inadequacy or failure *(Bastedo & Bowman, 2011)*. Students may cultivate a fear of underachievement, not alone for personal motivations, but also due to the perception that their outcomes reflect their institution's standing.

This strain is exacerbated by social comparison, especially in prestigious universities where students continually assess themselves against high-achieving peers. The perception of participating in an unending academic competition can generate a high-stress atmosphere, frequently resulting in burnout and emotional exhaustion *(Luthar et al., 2020).* In severe instances, it fosters a detrimental academic environment that stifles risk-taking, originality, and comprehensive growth in favor of metrics and productivity.

The emphasis on rankings is acknowledged as a major contributing factor to the rising prevalence of mental health problems among students globally. Organizations that place an undue emphasis on rankings risk unintentionally creating environments that neglect emotional health, impede group learning, and prioritize accomplishment above personal growth *(Raju, 2024)*. The psychological effects are not consistent; students from marginalized backgrounds or those with pre-existing

vulnerabilities are disproportionately affected, as they may already be dealing with issues of identity and inclusion.

3.3 The Pressure of Maintaining High Academic Performance

The rankings exert significant psychological pressure to excel academically, especially on students at prestigious universities. This pressure may result in an obsessive preoccupation with grades, competitive academic conduct, and apprehension regarding failure *(North, 2015).* A multitude of students tend to associate their GPA or academic performance with their self-worth, resulting in a precarious self-esteem that varies with academic outcomes.

In numerous instances, the organizational culture perpetuates this pressure. Students are frequently urged to engage in internships, research papers, and co-curricular accomplishments, not only for comprehensive development but also to provide data points that affect institutional rankings. Although these objectives can enhance a student's educational experience, they also introduce additional stress, particularly when students view these expectations as obligatory rather than optional *(Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021)*. The pursuit of perfection becomes all-encompassing, allowing minimal space for failure, introspection, or non-linear development.

Furthermore, the competitiveness instigated by rankings frequently undermines teamwork and mutual assistance among students. Peer connections, which ought to be sources of solace and companionship, can devolve into domains of comparison and competition *(Kowalski & Christensen, 2019).* Consequently, students may experience isolation, reluctance to seek assistance, and hesitance to acknowledge difficulties—thereby intensifying mental health issues and diminishing academic enjoyment.

3.4 Case Studies or Research Findings on Student Experiences with Rankings

Research studies across diverse educational systems have recorded the psychological effects of institutional rankings on students. A study by the American Psychological Association revealed that students at prestigious U.S. universities experience elevated levels of anxiety and pressure relative to their counterparts at lower-ranked or less competitive institutions *(Beiter et al., 2015).* Notwithstanding their academic achievements, these students demonstrated an increased propensity for perfectionism, fear of failure, and identity concerns associated with institutional reputation.

In the Indian context, interviews with students from prestigious institutions such as IITs and IIMs indicate a dual experience: the institution's prominence enhances

confidence but simultaneously imposes significant expectations from family, society, and faculty. Students frequently perceive the necessity to maintain not only their individual academic objectives but also the legacy and reputation of their institution *(Patel et al., 2004).*

A cross-national study published in Higher Education Research & Development indicated that students' satisfaction with their institution was frequently more correlated with perceived ranking than with actual academic experience *(Arambewela & Hall, 2009).* Students showed unhappiness even when lower-ranked universities provided higher faculty engagement or resources, since they believed that rankings determine institutional and personal worth. These findings highlight the intricate emotional landscape that kids traverse in academically competitive environments. Although numerous students excel in high-pressure environments, others experience silent difficulties, highlighting the necessity for institutional assistance and more empathetic academic cultures.

Rankings include student anxiety, pride, ambition, tension, and motivation. High rankings boost students' motivation and focus on their goals, but they also foster performance-oriented mindsets that may be detrimental to mental health. An institution's reputation affects students' overall college experience, mental health, and sense of self. Colleges must place equal emphasis on academic measures, teamwork, and personal growth as rankings have a greater impact on education. These psychological characteristics must be taken into account in order to create healthier, more inclusive learning environments.

4. PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF RANKINGS ON FACULTY

Faculty members in higher education are impacted by the wide-ranging effects of institutional rankings. Faculty members often face direct and indirect pressures from the desire to preserve or improve their institution's position in national or international rankings, much like students internalize their institution's reputation *(Collins & Park, 2016).* In most ranking systems, faculty contributions—which include research output, student involvement, and international partnerships—are key indicators. Expectations linked to these assessments are having an increasing impact on academics' professional lives, which affects their motivation and causes psychological stress. Rankings' effects on faculty motivation, stress, teamwork, job satisfaction, and career trajectories are examined in this section *(Manzano-Sánchez et al., 2021).*

4.1 Faculty Motivation and Career Progression

Faculty members frequently use institutional rankings as a surrogate indicator of their professional legitimacy. A prestigious university not only increases the prominence of its research but also improves its prospects for funding, collaboration, and academic mobility. In this regard, rankings can function as motivating instruments, prompting professors to participate in exemplary teaching, research, and service to improve their department's and institution's overall status *(Jacob & Meek, 2013).*

This drive is sometimes coupled with the need to generate quantifiable results that conform to ranking standards. Faculty members may feel obligated to adjust their professional development activities—such as publishing in prestigious journals, obtaining international research funds, and enhancing citation metrics—primarily to align with institutional objectives rather than their personal academic pursuits *(Jacob & Meek, 2013)*. The natural curiosity and intellectual flexibility inherent in scholarly work can be eclipsed by performance metrics, diminishing the subjective satisfaction obtained from academic endeavors.

Moreover, job advancement frequently correlates with an institution's ranking efficacy. In numerous institutions, promotions, tenure determinations, and salary increases are progressively predicated on quantitative metrics that are shaped by or reflect ranking systems *(Sauder & Espeland, 2009).* This establishes a high-pressure climate where failing to achieve specific performance criteria may hinder professional advancement, irrespective of a faculty member's involvement in student mentorship, curriculum development, or community service—factors that may be overlooked in ranking systems.

4.2 Pressure to Publish and Meet Ranking Criteria

The most significant effect of rankings on professors is the increased pressure to publish research in indexed, high-impact journals. Given that research production and citations are a crucial element of numerous global and national ranking systems, faculty members experience persistent pressure to preserve a robust publishing record *(Ioannidis et al., 2007)*. The adage "publish or perish" has gained heightened significance in this ranking-focused era, frequently compelling faculty to emphasize quantity rather than quality.

This emphasis on publication may result in various detrimental consequences. Scholars may opt for "conventional" study topics that are more probable to produce publishable outcomes, steering clear of experimental or multidisciplinary studies that may not conform to mainstream journals. In certain instances, the pressure may result in academic misconduct, including self-citation manipulation, data fabrication,

or publication in predatory journals—actions that undermine academic integrity *(Raitskaya & Tikhonova, 2023).*

The obligation to publish is accompanied by a temporal constraint. Faculty members sometimes have difficulties in reconciling research with teaching obligations, administrative tasks, and student mentorship *(Neumann & Terosky, 2007)*. This disparity may result in emotional exhaustion, burnout, and diminished job satisfaction, especially when institutional support systems like sabbaticals, research aid, or funding are insufficient.

4.3 The Impact of Rankings on Faculty Collaboration and Job Satisfaction

Rankings can promote both collaboration and competitiveness among teachers, however the competitive elements frequently prevail. In settings where personal accomplishments are prioritized for organizational benefit, camaraderie and teamwork may decline. Faculty may be reluctant to work with colleagues if it necessitates sharing credit or diminishing authorship, particularly when promotions and recognition are contingent upon first or matching authorship *(Aliyyah et al., 2020)*.

Furthermore, departments and disciplines that do not directly influence ranking metrics—such as the humanities, community engagement, or undergraduate education—may be undervalued. This marginalization may result in a sense of professional invisibility, diminished institutional support, and discontent among professors in such fields *(Adler & Harzing, 2009)*. The employment happiness of a faculty member, initially based on intellectual contribution and academic community, becomes dependent on conformity to measurable outcomes established by rating organizations.

In certain schools, rankings affect teaching responsibilities and research funding, frequently benefiting academics in STEM or management disciplines due to their perceived impact on institutional measures. This establishes internal hierarchies that may further demoralize academics in less quantifiable disciplines *(Boardman & Ponomariov, 2007)*. The cumulative effect results in a corporate environment where teamwork is frequently compromised for individual achievement, and long-term academic objectives are eclipsed by immediate ranking goals.

4.4 Case Studies or Research Findings on Faculty Experiences with Rankings

Empirical research has commenced documenting the impact of rankings on faculty well-being and performance across many regions and institutional kinds. In a research the UK higher education sector indicated that an increasing focus on

metrics and rankings was causing significant disenchantment among faculty members *(Locke, 2014)*. Participants indicated that rankings diminished their autonomy and fostered a more managerial, less collegial academic environment.

In the Indian setting, academics have noted that the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) has resulted in heightened bureaucratic oversight of faculty activities. Interviews with academics from public universities indicated that the drive to enhance ranking positions has resulted in excessive expectations and heightened scrutiny of research and teaching performance *(Nassa et al., 2021)*. In some instances, faculty perceived that administrative choices were excessively reliant on data, neglecting the qualitative dimensions of education.

In Australian institutions, research indicates that rankings affect both institutional policy and hiring and promotion procedures. Early-career researchers, specifically, expressed elevated worry around the performance standards associated with world-wide rankings like QS or Times Higher Education *(Uslu, 2017).* These demands influenced their research decisions, collaborative practices, and enduring academic fulfilment.

The psychological effects on faculty resulting from institutional rankings are intricate and enduring. Rankings can inspire, cultivate professionals, and achieve international recognition; yet, they may impose stringent criteria that could restrict academic autonomy, collaboration, and overall well-being. Faculty may perceive themselves more as data producers than as educators and researchers because of publishing pressures, performance measures, and career progression *(Sadlak et al., 2008).* These difficulties necessitate institutions to adopt a holistic approach that prioritizes quality, fosters collegiality, and supports scholars across several fields. An equitable technique can harmonize institutional proficiency and individual welfare, enhancing the viability and enjoyment of academia for professors.

5. THE INFLUENCE OF RANKINGS ON INSTITUTIONAL REPUTATION AND RESOURCES

University rankings have become significant benchmarks that impact perceptions and influence the operations of higher education institutions. As public, corporate, and international stakeholders increasingly reference rankings to assess academic quality, institutions face escalating pressure to align their plans and resources accordingly *(Thakur, 2007)*. Rankings have evolved beyond just symbols of prestige; they significantly influence institutional planning, investments, and decisions. This section examines how rankings influence institutional behavior by exerting administrative pressure to enhance scores, affecting resource allocation, and guiding decision-making processes across different organizational tiers.

5.1 Institutional Pressure to Improve Rankings

The pursuit of improvement in global or national rankings has become a primary objective for numerous universities. Institutions frequently feel obligated to invest significantly in initiatives that correspond with ranking criteria, like research infrastructure, faculty recruiting, or foreign alliances *(Mohrman et al., 2008)*. In certain instances, specialized "ranking task forces" are established to devise strategies for enhancing performance measures. Administrators may amend academic policies, promote high-impact publications, enhance outreach to international students, or even alter data submissions to ranking organizations.

This pressure is especially pronounced in nations where rankings are tightly linked to regulatory structures or competitive financing. In India, success in the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) is increasingly associated with eligibility for specific government subsidies and schemes. Worldwide, presence in esteemed rankings such as QS or Times Higher Education can facilitate international partnerships and attract global student recruitment, prompting colleges to enhance their visibility efforts *(Sowter et al., 2017).*

The drawback of this fixation on rankings is that institutions may prioritize immediate numerical improvements over enduring scholarly objectives. There is a propensity to favor superficial modifications that enhance the perception of progress—such as augmenting faculty-to-student ratios or allocating resources to public relations—over enacting substantive reforms in instructional quality or academic governance *(Ginsberg, 2011)*. In this context, the genuine purpose of education and study may be jeopardized by the quest for numerical prestige.

5.2 Impact of Rankings on Resource Allocation and Funding

Rankings significantly impact the allocation of financial and human resources within an institution. Departments with higher rankings frequently obtain a greater allocation of funds, enhanced facilities, and superior staffing assistance, as they are regarded as making a more substantial contribution to the institution's reputation (Michael, 2005). In contrast, subjects or activities that do not immediately improve ranking scores—such as the arts, humanities, or community service initiatives—may face resource limitations or potential reductions.

In several institutions, the distribution of internal research funding, travel stipends, or sabbaticals is contingent upon faculty achievement in ranking-related criteria such as publication volume or citation influence. This performance-oriented distribution strategy might cultivate a competitive environment that prioritizes research output over teaching quality or student mentorship *(Permatasari & Tandiayuk, 2023)*. Furthermore, external financing—be it from governmental sources, individual bene-

factors, or industry—typically advantages institutions with high ranking standings. A highly regarded institution is perceived as a secure and esteemed investment, drawing increased endowments and project-specific funding (Egeland & Pelopidas, 2025). This establishes a self-perpetuating loop in which well-funded universities enhance their ranks, while lower-ranked schools find it challenging to advance due to insufficient investment.

The gradual disparity in resource allocation threatens to exacerbate inequality within the higher education system. Less notable schools may have an increasing disadvantage regarding teacher recruitment, infrastructure enhancement, and student services, hence exacerbating the disparity in academic quality and student results.

5.3 Rankings and Their Influence on Institutional Decision-Making

Institutional policies and strategic decisions are progressively influenced by ranking metrics. Data analytics are crucial in shaping institutions' admissions criteria and faculty evaluation procedures, influencing their presentation to rating agencies and stakeholders *(Agasisti & Bowers, 2017).* This frequently entails modifications in curriculum design to appeal to international students, alterations in faculty assessment criteria to emphasize publishing, or investments in branding initiatives to improve worldwide awareness.

To enhance internationalization rankings, universities might establish collaborations with foreign institutions or implement dual-degree programs, regardless of whether these measures correspond with local requirements or student preferences. In an effort to improve employability rankings, colleges may create business partnerships or skill development centers—beneficial initiatives, however occasionally prioritizing corporate prominence over academic integrity *(De Wit & Altbach, 2021)*. Strategies for faculty recruitment and retention are also affected by rankings. Universities may provide lucrative packages to prominent scholars who secure money and citations. Departments may strategically recruit or retain staff whose expertise corresponds with prominent research topics or who possess robust publication records in prestigious journals, thereby advancing ranking objectives (Park & Gordon, 1996)).

Although data-driven decision-making can enhance accountability and openness, it also poses a risk of constricting the breadth of institutional vision. Institutions may become too responsive to alterations in ranking criteria, leading to unpredictable changes in emphasis and objectives. Rather than cultivating a distinct academic identity or addressing regional educational requirements, institutions may begin to mimic worldwide "ranking leaders," frequently implementing uniform solutions that disregard contextual circumstances *(Sauder & Espeland, 2009).*

Rankings influence colleges' self-perception, resource allocation, goal-setting, and strategic decision-making. Rankings can enhance research focus, infrastructure, and global engagement, although they may also present challenges to the objective of higher education. Institutions may overlook local community requirements, underfund non-prestigious sectors, and favor immediate gains over long-term sustainability. Rankings ought to serve as tools for advancement rather than objectives; therefore, a balanced methodology that acknowledges institutional diversity and celebrates comprehensive educational accomplishments is essential.

6. COPING STRATEGIES AND SUPPORT MECHANISMS

Given the increasing psychological strain of rankings, it is essential to investigate the responses of students, faculty, and institutions to these demands. The pursuit of elevated rankings may serve as a motivation, although the psychological burden it imposes on individuals and organizational frameworks is undeniable *(Austin & Gamson, 1983)*. Coping methods and support measures are essential for cultivating resilience, improving well-being, and reestablishing equilibrium in academic settings. This section examines the many coping strategies utilized by students and faculty to manage ranking-related stress, as well as institutional initiatives that may mitigate the negative psychological effects of performance expectations.

6.1 Coping Mechanisms for Students Dealing with Ranking Pressure

Students, especially in competitive academic environments, frequently internalize institutional rankings as indicators of their value or future opportunities. Managing external demands necessitates deliberate tactics to preserve mental stability and intellectual drive. A multitude of pupils derive advantages from cultivating personal resilience via mindfulness techniques, introspection, and pragmatic goal establishment *(Locke, 2011)*. Practices including journaling, meditation, and cognitive-behavioral strategies assist students in reframing detrimental thought patterns linked to comparative performance or institutional reputation.

Peer support systems and student counseling services function as essential avenues for articulating issues and managing anxiety. Group therapy, peer mentorship, and support circles offer a non-judgmental environment for the exchange of experiences and reciprocal encouragement. Moreover, institutions should proactively enhance knowledge of mental health services and mainstream the pursuit of psychological support as an indication of strength rather than a deficiency *(Simmons et al., 2023).* Here in Table 3, a comprehensive framework of individual and institutional

approaches to manage the psychological burden of rankings, including practical implementation methods.

Table 3. Coping Strategies for Managing Ranking-Related Stress

Level	Strategy	Description	Implementation
Individual (Students)	Mindfulness practices	Techniques for stress reduction and present-moment awareness	Daily meditation, stress management workshops, journaling
	Goal reframing	Setting personal goals independent of ranking metrics	Personal development plans, regular reflection sessions
	Peer support	Creating support networks with fellow students	Study groups, peer mentoring programs
Individual (Faculty)	Time management	Techniques to balance research, teaching, and service	Priority setting workshops, work-life balance training
	Collaborative research	Joint projects that distribute workload and enhance output	Cross-departmental initiatives, research teams
	Professional development	Skills enhancement for career progression	Workshops, sabbaticals, training programs
Institutional	Comprehensive wellness programs	Campus-wide initiatives to promote well-being	Counseling services, wellness centers, stress relief activities
	Alternative assessment frameworks	Evaluation systems beyond traditional rankings	Balanced scorecards, qualitative assessments
	Transparent communication	Clear information about rankings and their limitations	Information sessions, interpretation guidelines
	Resource allocation	Equitable distribution regardless of ranking impact	Needs-based budgeting, inclusive funding models

Academic advisors and faculty mentors are essential in directing students towards personal development rather than seeking external affirmation. Promoting passion-driven learning, acknowledging individual advancement, and embracing many career trajectories can mitigate the restrictive perspective fostered by rankings *(Snyder-Duch, 2018)*. By cultivating intrinsic motivation and comprehensive development, students can restore their autonomy and confidence in their educational pursuits.

6.2 Faculty Support Systems and Professional Development

Faculty members also necessitate coping mechanisms to manage the stress and expectations linked to performance indicators. Academic professionals may experience burnout from the incessant pressure to publish, obtain funds, and enhance ranking-related metrics. To address this, institutions must cultivate a supportive

work environment that prioritizes both professional success and personal well-being *(Paradeise & Filliatreau, 2016)*. Professional development initiatives focused on time management, work-life balance, and stress alleviation can enable academics to address these difficulties more efficiently. Workshops on mental health literacy, emotional resilience, and career planning ought to be incorporated into faculty training modules *(Woloshyn & Savage, 2020)*. Sabbaticals and flexible employment arrangements can offer essential relief for individuals experiencing distress.

Equally significant is fostering a collaborative and collegial atmosphere instead than one rooted on competition. Peer acknowledgment, collaborative research funding, and faculty appreciation events can enhance social cohesion and a collective purpose within departments. Faculty mentorship schemes, particularly for early-career academics, can provide direction, comfort, and encouragement among institutional performance expectations *(Zemichael, 2020)*. Advocating for diverse evaluation criteria, including acknowledgment of contributions to teaching, mentorship, and community engagement (beyond just publishing metrics), alleviates the narrow focus induced by rankings. Faculty must perceive their work as significant and esteemed beyond its quantitative influence.

6.3 Institutional Approaches to Mitigating the Negative Psychological Impact of Rankings

Institutions must protect their academic communities from the possibly detrimental psychological impacts of ranking-oriented initiatives. Although rankings are improbable to vanish, institutional responses can profoundly modify their impact on individuals. A crucial initial step is to realign internal communication, prioritizing educational quality, equity, and personal development over simply positional success *(Hämäläinen et al., 2002)*.

Universities can establish a precedent by implementing inclusive performance evaluation systems that recognize various achievements. Formulating regulations that enhance student welfare, support teachers, and ensure ethical data reporting not only maintains integrity but also fosters a more conducive academic environment. Implementing comprehensive wellness efforts across the campus, including mindfulness centers, mental health awareness campaigns, and stress-relief activities during critical academic periods, may significantly foster a culture of compassion *(Sowmiya, 2024)*.

Open discussions regarding the constraints and consequences of rankings are crucial. Institutions must to instruct students and professors on the methodology of ranking construction, the metrics utilized (and omitted), and the crucial interpretation of these rankings. This knowledge can diminish uncritical reliance on rankings and promote more educated, analytical interaction with these systems *(Ioannidis et al.,*

2007). Institutions can exemplify leadership by engaging in alternative assessment frameworks, such student satisfaction surveys, community impact reports, or sustainability indices. These methodologies may offer a more nuanced understanding of academic accomplishment while minimizing the detrimental competitive advantage linked to worldwide rankings. Ultimately, institutional leaders must champion equilibrium. Their communication, strategizing, and allocation of resources must demonstrate a dedication to inclusive development, personal welfare, and a sustainable academic vision—rather than solely focusing on ascension in ranking metrics *(Ngwane & Ngwane, 2015).*

Individual remedies, communal support structures, and institutional accountability are essential to mitigate the psychological effects of rankings. Knowledge of mental health, peer support, and intrinsic motivation significantly benefit students. For instructors to exhibit resilience, they necessitate organized professional development, collaboration, and expansive definitions of success. Institutions must rigorously assess rankings and enact comprehensive enhancements in education and well-being. Academics can transform rankings from a source of anxiety to a catalyst for sustainable growth and self-improvement by employing inclusive coping strategies.

7. THE FUTURE OF RANKINGS AND THEIR PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT

The dialogue surrounding mental health, fairness, and sustainable education is intensifying, leading to heightened examination of future rankings in higher education. Although rankings have historically indicated institutional reputation, their techniques, influence, and significance are being reassessment due to increasing concerns around fairness, inclusion, and psychological strain *(Shin & Toutkoushian, 2011)*. This section examines the potential evolution of rankings, the changing perspectives among key stakeholders, and the characteristics of a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to academic evaluation in the future.

7.1 Potential Shifts in Ranking Methodologies and Their Effects

A viable approach to mitigating the adverse psychological impacts of rankings is the advancement of the ranking procedures themselves. Conventional systems such as QS, THE, or NIRF predominantly depend on measurable indicators including research productivity, faculty-student ratios, citations, global perspective, and employer reputation *(Teichler, 2011)*. Nevertheless, these metrics frequently overlook factors like as student satisfaction, faculty well-being, teaching quality, community

participation, and contributions to social justice—all of which are essential for the comprehensive success of educational institutions.

Recent advancements indicate that forthcoming ranking models may integrate more qualitative and intricate factors. For example, new indexes may prioritize environmental sustainability, diversity and inclusion, and societal effect more significantly. The advent of alternative frameworks, such as the UI Green Metric ranking for sustainability and the Times Higher Education Impact Rankings associated with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, exemplifies this tendency *(Goglio, 2016)*. Changes in approach can profoundly influence institutional behavior. Institutions may begin to coordinate their tactics not alone to ascend the rankings but to authentically enhance student experiences and social contributions *(Bastedo & Bowman, 2011)*. The psychological strain on students and professors may be mitigated if success is assessed in more humane and less competitive terms. However, it is essential to ensure that even novel approaches do not become inflexible or exploitative in many manners. An analysis of evolving ranking methodologies that emphasize sustainability, wellbeing, and inclusion, with projections of their psychological implications and institutional responses is showcased in Table 4.

7.2 Changing Perceptions of Rankings in Higher Education

Perceptions of rankings among students, professors, and institutional leaders are progressively evolving. Previously seen as conclusive indicators of quality, rankings are now met with increased scepticism and rigorous scrutiny by numerous parties. Students are increasingly acknowledging that prestigious universities may not consistently correspond with their individual or academic requirements *(Wilbers & Brankovic, 2023)*. Elements like as campus culture, faculty mentorship, affordability, and work-life balance are increasingly influential in decision-making.

Faculty members are increasingly questioning the significance of pursuing metrics that may not accurately represent substantial contributions to education or community development. A burgeoning movement in academia seeks to recover autonomy from external ranking systems and emphasize collaborative, interdisciplinary, and socially responsible research. University administrations, especially in progressive or mission-oriented schools, are reassessing their association with rankings *(Carnegie, 2022)*. Certain universities have commenced a complete withdrawal from conventional ranking methodologies, prioritizing institutional autonomy, academic independence, and internal evaluations over external validation. This change in perspective diminishes performance-related anxiety and fosters more genuine and inclusive academic environments.

Table 4. Future Trends in University Rankings and Their Implications

Trend	Description	Potential Psychological Impact	Institutional Response
Sustainability metrics	Inclusion of environmental impact measures in rankings	Reduced focus on traditional performance metrics, increased purpose-driven motivation	Investment in sustainable infrastructure, green initiatives
Wellbeing indicators	Assessment of student and faculty mental health resources	Validation of holistic development, reduced performance stress	Enhanced mental health services, wellness-oriented policies
Equity and inclusion	Evaluation of diversity initiatives and outcomes	Increased sense of belonging for marginalized groups	Diversity recruitment, inclusive teaching practices
Regional contextualization	Rankings adjusted for regional circumstances	Reduced comparison stress across dissimilar contexts	Focus on locally relevant goals and achievements
Teaching emphasis	Greater weight on teaching quality in ranking systems	Balanced faculty focus between research and teaching	Investment in pedagogy, recognition of teaching excellence
Community impact	Assessment of university contributions to local communities	Purpose-driven motivation, connection to societal needs	Community engagement initiatives, service learning

7.3 The Role of Rankings in a More Holistic and Inclusive Educational Environment

As higher education confronts difficulties such as global inequity, mental health crises, and social justice demands, the function of rankings must adapt accordingly. An inclusive and comprehensive approach to rankings would transcend limited academic achievement metrics to encompass well-being, accessibility, ethical governance, and community influence *(Ahmad & Islam, 2024).*

In this anticipated future, institutions would be assessed not only on their capacity to generate innovative research but also on their commitment to the welfare of their students and staff. Rankings may encompass metrics related to student mental health services, faculty development initiatives, inclusive policies, and contributions to marginalized groups *(National Research Council et al., 2012).* They should also evaluate how institutions enable students to become socially responsible citizens rather than merely high-achieving professionals.

Furthermore, a revised ranking system would emphasize contextually relevant assessment. Understanding the distinct obstacles encountered by institutions in underdeveloped countries or marginalized areas can aid in deconstructing the "one-size-fits-all" rating model. Contextualized evaluations would enable institutions to

be recognized for their strengths instead of penalized for failing to conform to elite global standards *(Ho & Im, 2015)*.

It is essential that students and professors participate in the development of these new ranking models. Participatory frameworks that engage stakeholders in determining priorities help democratize the ranking process and enhance its alignment with genuine educational values. The future of higher education rankings remains ambiguous. Existing methods have influenced institutional objectives, although their psychological effects on students and educators necessitate thorough examination and reform. Conventional performance indicators are declining in popularity as techniques incorporate a broader array of valuable measures and perceptions grow increasingly critical. An innovative, inclusive, and equitable ranking system can reduce worry, enhance well-being, and assist institutions in prioritizing education, fairness, and community involvement. The academic community could more effectively cater to its varied and evolving demographic by reconceptualizing rankings as instruments for constructive change instead of competitive stratification.

8. CONCLUSION

Rankings in higher education have a significant and complex psychological impact on both professors and students. Students may experience more stress, anxiety, and self-doubt as a result of the pressure to perform academically and the emotional toll that rankings take. Faculty members face comparable obstacles with regard to career progression and performance standards, which could affect their collaboration and job happiness. Rankings are crucial for institutional reputation and decision-making, but it is important to consider their psychological implications as well. To lessen the negative consequences of rankings, educational institutions must give teachers and students coping mechanisms and support networks. For the future, a well-rounded ranking technique that prioritizes thorough evaluation and wellbeing is essential. Alleviating the psychological burden of rankings will allow higher education to better serve its community, fostering a more sustainable and inclusive academic culture.

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Chapter 10
The Weight of Numbers: Examining the Psychological Toll of Rankings on Academic Stakeholders

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the profound psychological impact of institutional and individual rankings on students and faculty within higher education. While rankings are often presented as objective measures of quality and performance, they can generate significant stress, anxiety, and distorted perceptions of self-worth. This chapter will delve into the specific psychological mechanisms through which rankings influence

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academic stakeholders, including the effects on self-esteem, motivation, mental health, and academic integrity. We will examine the pressures associated with achieving and maintaining high rankings, the role of social comparison and perceived competition, and the potential for rankings to exacerbate existing inequalities. Furthermore, we will discuss strategies for mitigating the negative psychological consequences of rankings and fostering a more balanced and holistic approach to evaluating academic achievement.

1) INTRODUCTION

Rankings have become an omnipresent force in higher education, permeating everything from institutional strategy to individual career trajectories. Universities, departments, and even individual faculty members are increasingly judged by their placement on various league tables, which purport to measure academic excellence, research output, and student satisfaction. These rankings, often widely publicized and readily accessible, wield considerable influence over public perception, funding decisions, and student enrollment. However, the relentless pursuit of higher rankings can have unintended and detrimental consequences, particularly on the mental well-being of those within the academic community. (Chen & Chan, 2021).

This chapter delves into the psychological toll that rankings exact on students and faculty, examining how these numerical assessments can shape their self-perception, motivation, and overall mental health. We move beyond the surface-level metrics to explore the lived experiences of those directly affected by the ranking system, highlighting the anxieties and pressures that arise from a culture obsessed with numerical validation (De la Poza et al., 2021). By focusing on the human cost of rankings, we aim to shed light on the often-overlooked emotional dimensions of academic evaluation.

Rankings, while intended to provide objective evaluations of academic performance, often fall short of capturing the multifaceted nature of education. The emphasis on quantifiable metrics can lead to a narrow and distorted perception of academic worth, creating significant psychological distress for students and faculty alike (Sukoco et al., 2021). The constant comparison and competition fostered by rankings can fuel feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and even depression, as individuals struggle to reconcile their personal experiences with the often-simplistic metrics used to define success. This chapter argues that the weight of numbers can create a toxic academic environment, where the pursuit of higher rankings overshadows the intrinsic value of learning and scholarship.

2) THE PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS OF RANKING IMPACT

The psychological impact of rankings stems from several interconnected mechanisms. Social Comparison Theory posits that individuals naturally compare themselves to others to evaluate their own abilities and standing. Rankings exacerbate this tendency, fueling both upward comparisons (comparing oneself to those ranked higher) which can lead to feelings of inadequacy and demotivation, and downward comparisons (comparing oneself to those ranked lower) which can foster a false sense of superiority. This constant comparison cycle can significantly impact self-esteem, as individuals begin to define their worth based on their relative position in the ranking hierarchy rather than on their intrinsic qualities or personal growth. (Liu et al., 2024).

The relentless pressure to achieve and maintain high rankings can induce significant performance anxiety and stress. This anxiety can manifest in various ways, including sleeplessness, difficulty concentrating, and even physical symptoms (Zhang et al., 2024). The fear of failing to meet the perceived expectations of rankings can lead to a state of chronic stress, which has detrimental effects on mental health and overall well-being. Furthermore, the high-stakes nature of these evaluations can exacerbate pre-existing vulnerabilities, making individuals more susceptible to anxiety disorders and depression.

Rankings can also contribute to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, particularly through the development of imposter syndrome. Individuals may attribute their success to external factors or luck, rather than their own abilities, fearing that they will be exposed as frauds. This feeling is intensified when external metrics, such as rankings, become the primary measure of self-worth. The tendency to internalize these metrics leads individuals to define their value based on numerical rankings rather than on their intrinsic motivation, passion for learning, or contributions to their field (Zhao, 2024). This can create a distorted perception of success, where the pursuit of higher rankings overshadows the genuine pursuit of knowledge and intellectual growth. The pressure of high stakes testing, and performance measurements, compound these issues, pushing students to focus solely on achieving high numerical values, and neglecting the broader learning experience.

Table 1 succinctly outlines the core psychological mechanisms through which academic rankings exert their influence. The emphasis on Social Comparison Theory highlights how these rankings fuel a constant cycle of self-evaluation, impacting self-esteem through both upward and downward comparisons. The resulting Performance Anxiety and Stress underscore the significant mental strain caused by the pressure to achieve high numerical scores. Furthermore, the table points to the insidious development of Fear of Failure and Imposter Syndrome, where individuals begin to doubt their own abilities, regardless of their actual accomplishments.

Finally, the Internalization of External Metrics reveals the dangerous tendency for individuals to define their self-worth based solely on numerical rankings, rather than recognizing their intrinsic value and the broader scope of their academic and personal contributions.

Table 1. Psychological Impacts of Academic Rankings

Category	*Impact*	*Description*
General Psychological Mechanisms	Social Comparison Theory	Rankings intensify upward and downward social comparisons, affecting self-esteem.
General Psychological Mechanisms	Performance Anxiety and Stress	The pressure to achieve high rankings leads to increased stress and anxiety.
General Psychological Mechanisms	Fear of Failure and Imposter Syndrome	Rankings can contribute to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt.
General Psychological Mechanisms	Internalization of External Metrics	Individuals may define their self-worth based on numerical rankings, not intrinsic value.

3) IMPACT ON STUDENTS

Rankings significantly impact student academic motivation and engagement. While some students may be driven by the competitive aspect of rankings, many experience diminished intrinsic motivation. The focus shifts from a genuine love of learning to a pursuit of high scores and favorable rankings. This can lead to a surface-level approach to education, where students prioritize memorization and test-taking skills over deep understanding and critical thinking. Furthermore, the constant pressure to perform well can create a sense of apathy and disengagement, as students feel overwhelmed by the perceived high stakes of their academic endeavors. (Soysal et al., 2024).

The stress and anxiety associated with rankings disproportionately affect students from marginalized groups (Grayson & Grays on, 2024). These students may already face additional challenges, such as socioeconomic disadvantages, cultural barriers, or discrimination, which are exacerbated by the pressure to perform well in ranking-driven environments. The fear of confirming negative stereotypes and the pressure to represent their communities can intensify feelings of anxiety and inadequacy. Moreover, the lack of representation and support systems within highly ranked institutions can further contribute to the psychological burden experienced by these students.

Rankings can also distort students' perceptions of academic success and failure. Students may begin to equate their self-worth with their numerical ranking, leading to

feelings of inadequacy when they do not achieve the desired results. This can create a cycle of negative self-talk and diminished self-esteem, which can have long-lasting effects on their mental health (Kethüda, 2024). Additionally, the pressure to achieve high rankings can influence students' choices of major and career paths, leading them to prioritize fields with perceived higher prestige or earning potential over their genuine interests and passions. This can result in a lack of fulfillment and a sense of misalignment between their academic pursuits and their personal values. The correlation between the focus on rankings, and the increase in mental health issues within student populations is clear, with many students reporting increased levels of depression, and anxiety related directly to the pressure to achieve high rankings.

Table 2 specifically details the detrimental psychological impacts of academic rankings on students. The emphasis on "Effects on Academic Motivation and Engagement" illustrates how the focus on numerical scores can undermine intrinsic motivation, shifting the student's purpose from genuine learning to mere achievement. "Increased Stress and Anxiety" highlights the disproportionate burden placed on marginalized students, compounding existing challenges. Furthermore, "Distorted Perceptions of Academic Success and Failure" underscores how students' self-worth can become dangerously intertwined with rankings, leading to feelings of inadequacy. The crucial "Link to Mental Health Issues" reveals the clear correlation between ranking pressures and the rise in mental health problems like depression and anxiety within student populations. Lastly, "Effects on Major and Career Choices" shows how rankings can steer students towards high-prestige fields, potentially sacrificing personal interests and long-term fulfillment.

Table 2. Psychological Impacts of Academic Rankings - Impact on Students

Category	*Impact*	*Description*
Impact on Students	Effects on Academic Motivation and Engagement	Can diminish intrinsic motivation, leading to a focus on scores rather than learning.
Impact on Students	Increased Stress and Anxiety	Disproportionately affects marginalized students, exacerbating existing challenges.
Impact on Students	Distorted Perceptions of Academic Success and Failure	Self-worth becomes tied to numerical rankings, leading to feelings of inadequacy.
Impact on Students	Link to Mental Health Issues	Correlation between ranking pressure and increased mental health problems like depression and anxiety.
Impact on Students	Effects on Major and Career Choices	Students may prioritize high-prestige fields over personal interests.

4) IMPACT ON FACULTY

The pressure to publish in high-impact journals and secure substantial grant funding is a significant burden placed upon faculty, directly driven by institutional rankings. These metrics, often heavily weighted in ranking methodologies, force faculty to prioritize research outputs that garner high citations and financial support. This can lead to a narrow focus on research areas deemed "profitable" or "prestigious," potentially neglecting valuable but less marketable research avenues. The relentless pursuit of these metrics can create a culture of anxiety and competition, where the quality and depth of research may be sacrificed for quantity and visibility (Iqbal et al., 2024).

This pressure significantly affects research priorities and academic freedom. Faculty may feel compelled to conform to research trends and pursue projects that are more likely to yield high-impact publications, rather than exploring novel or interdisciplinary ideas that may be more intellectually stimulating or socially relevant (Górska et al., 2024). The need to secure funding can also limit academic freedom, as researchers may be forced to align their work with the priorities of funding agencies or industry partners. This can stifle intellectual curiosity and hinder the development of groundbreaking research that challenges conventional wisdom.

The increased competition fostered by ranking systems can also lead to ethical dilemmas and potential academic misconduct. The pressure to publish and secure funding can incentivize plagiarism, data fabrication, and other forms of academic dishonesty. Furthermore, the emphasis on individual achievement can undermine collaborative research and create a toxic academic environment where faculty members are pitted against each other (Haenlein & Jack, 2025). This competitive atmosphere can erode trust and collegiality, hindering the free exchange of ideas and the advancement of knowledge.

Faculty members also experience significant pressure to prioritize ranking metrics over teaching quality. The focus on research outputs and grant funding can lead to a neglect of teaching responsibilities, as faculty members may allocate less time and resources to course development, student mentoring, and pedagogical innovation (Haenlein & Jack, 2025; Górska et al., 2024). This can negatively impact the quality of education and student learning experiences. Moreover, the pressure to achieve high rankings can create a culture where teaching is undervalued and seen as a secondary responsibility, further contributing to the decline in teaching quality.

The cumulative effects of these pressures can lead to significant job dissatisfaction and burnout among faculty. The constant stress of meeting ranking-driven expectations, coupled with the erosion of academic freedom and the neglect of teaching, can create a sense of disillusionment and exhaustion. Faculty members may feel overwhelmed by the demands of their jobs, leading to decreased productivity,

increased absenteeism, and even early retirement (Iqbal et al., 2024; Górska et al., 2024). This burnout can have detrimental effects on the overall academic environment, impacting both the quality of research and the educational experience of students.

Table 3 encapsulates the significant psychological pressures exerted on faculty by academic ranking systems. The relentless "Pressure to Publish & Secure Grants" forces a narrow research focus, potentially sacrificing valuable but less "high-impact" investigations. This constriction of "Research Priorities & Freedom" extends to limiting novel explorations, as research becomes driven by funding and metrics. The intensified "Increased Competition & Misconduct" creates a toxic environment, tempting unethical practices. Furthermore, "Prioritization of Metrics over Teaching" degrades educational quality, as research and rankings overshadow pedagogical duties. Ultimately, the "Faculty Job Satisfaction & Burnout" reflects the cumulative strain, leading to dissatisfaction and exhaustion, undermining the well-being of academic professionals.

Table 3. Psychological Impacts of Academic Rankings - Impact on Faculty

Category	*Impact*	*Description*
Research Focus	Pressure to Publish & Secure Grants	Faculty prioritize high-impact journals and grant funding, potentially neglecting valuable research.
Academic Freedom & Priorities	Effects on Research Priorities & Freedom	Research may be driven by funding and high-impact potential, limiting novel exploration.
Ethical Concerns & Competition	Increased Competition & Misconduct	Pressure can lead to unethical practices and a toxic, competitive environment.
Teaching vs. Metrics	Prioritization of Metrics over Teaching	Teaching quality may suffer as research and ranking metrics take precedence.
Job Satisfaction & Well-being	Faculty Job Satisfaction & Burnout	Cumulative pressures lead to dissatisfaction, exhaustion, and potential burnout.

5) EXACERBATING INEQUALITIES

Academic rankings, while presented as objective measures of merit, often exacerbate existing social and economic disparities. The metrics used to determine rankings, such as standardized test scores, research funding, and publication rates, tend to favor institutions and individuals with greater access to resources and privilege. Consequently, students and faculty from underrepresented backgrounds, who may already face systemic barriers, are further disadvantaged by ranking systems that fail to account for these inequalities. This creates a cycle where those who are

already marginalized are further pushed to the periphery of academic recognition and opportunity (Jama et al., 2024).

The disproportionate impact on students and faculty from underrepresented backgrounds is particularly concerning. These individuals often navigate environments that are less supportive and more challenging than their privileged peers (Bao et al., 2024). Students from low-income families, for example, may lack access to quality educational resources and test preparation, impacting their standardized test scores. Faculty members from underrepresented groups may face implicit bias in hiring and promotion processes, as well as limited access to research funding and mentorship. Rankings, by relying on metrics that are influenced by these disparities, reinforce and perpetuate these inequalities, leading to a less diverse and equitable academic landscape.

Furthermore, rankings significantly influence funding and resource allocation for less prestigious institutions. Universities with lower rankings often struggle to attract top faculty, secure research grants, and enroll high-achieving students. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle where institutions with fewer resources are unable to improve their rankings, further limiting their access to funding and opportunities. This can lead to a widening gap between elite institutions and those serving underrepresented communities, perpetuating a system where privilege is concentrated at the top and disadvantage is entrenched at the bottom (Sarpong & Adelekan, 2024). The emphasis on rankings can thus undermine efforts to promote social mobility and create a more equitable higher education system.

This table 4 effectively outlines a comprehensive approach to understanding learning barriers by gathering perceptions from diverse school support stakeholders. Teachers provide crucial classroom-level insights through observations and student work analysis, while school counselors and psychologists illuminate socio-emotional factors via case reviews and interviews. Parents offer valuable perspectives on the home environment's influence and school communication, gathered through surveys and conferences. Administrators contribute systemic understanding via data analysis and policy reviews, and students themselves provide direct insights into their learning experiences. Special education professionals offer specialized expertise regarding IEP effectiveness and resource needs through case studies and collaboration observations. By triangulating data from these various sources, schools can develop a holistic picture of learning barriers and implement targeted interventions.

Table 4. Exploring School Support Stakeholders' Perceptions in Identifying Learning Barriers

Stakeholder Group	*Perception Focus Areas*	*Potential Data Collection Methods*	*Expected Insights*
Teachers	- Classroom observations of student engagement. - Identification of recurring learning difficulties. - Perceived impact of curriculum and teaching methods. - Awareness of individual student needs.	- Surveys, questionnaires. - Focus group discussions. - Individual interviews. - Classroom observation checklists. - Student work analysis.	- Detailed insights into classroom-based barriers. - Practical suggestions for instructional adjustments. - Identification of specific student learning gaps. - Understanding of curriculum effectiveness.
School Counselors/ Psychologists	- Identification of socio-emotional barriers. - Perceived impact of student mental health. - Analysis of student behavior patterns. - Effectiveness of existing support services.	- Individual student case reviews. - Interviews with students and parents. - Review of student records. - Analysis of standardized test scores. - Surveys about school climate and mental health.	- Insights into underlying emotional/ behavioral issues. - Recommendations for tailored support plans. - Understanding the scope of student mental health needs. - Evaluation of current support programs.
Parents/Guardians	- Perceived learning challenges at home. - Awareness of their child's learning style. - Perceived communication with the school. - Understanding of available support resources.	- Parent surveys. - Parent-teacher conferences. - Focus group discussions. - Home visit interviews (where appropriate).	- Understanding of the home environment's impact on learning. - Insights into parental concerns and expectations. - Identification of gaps in school-parent communication. - Suggestions for improved family engagement.
School Administrators/ Principals	- Perceived systemic barriers (e.g., resources, policies). - Evaluation of school-wide support programs. - Analysis of student performance data. - Perceived effectiveness of teacher training.	- Review of school performance data. - Staff meetings and discussions. - Analysis of budget and resource allocation. - Surveys regarding policy effectiveness.	- Understanding of institutional challenges. - Recommendations for resource allocation. - Insights into policy and program effectiveness. - Identification of areas for professional development.

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Table 4. Continued

Stakeholder Group	*Perception Focus Areas*	*Potential Data Collection Methods*	*Expected Insights*
Students (where appropriate, depending on age)	- Perceived learning difficulties. - Awareness of their own learning styles. - Perceived support from teachers and peers. - Suggestions for improvement.	- Student surveys. - Individual interviews. - Focus groups (age-appropriate). - Student reflection journals.	- Direct insights into student experiences. - Understanding of student-perceived barriers. - Suggestions for peer support and classroom adjustments.
Special Education Professionals	- Analysis of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). - Effectiveness of specialized interventions. - Perceived resource needs for students with disabilities. - Collaboration with general education teachers.	- Case study reviews. - Teacher collaboration observations. - Interviews with related service providers. - Review of assessment data.	- Insights into the efficacy of special education services. - Recommendations for improving inclusion and differentiation. - Identification of resource gaps for students with disabilities.

This table 5 effectively translates the risks associated with ESG rating disparities into the context of university ranking inequalities, highlighting how reliance on narrow ranking metrics exacerbates existing social and economic disparities within academia. Financial risks manifest as unequal access to funding and resource misallocation, while reputational risks stem from perceived lack of commitment to equity, damaging trust and credibility. Operational risks hinder the attraction and retention of diverse talent, and legal and regulatory risks arise from potential discrimination claims and non-compliance. Ultimately, strategic risks emerge from misaligned decisions and failure to adapt to evolving societal expectations regarding equity and social responsibility. The mitigation strategies emphasize advocating for holistic ranking methodologies, promoting transparency, fostering inclusive environments, and integrating equity into core institutional strategies.

Table 5. Relating ESG (environmental, social, and governance) Rating Disparity Risks to University Ranking Inequalities

Category of Risk (from ESG)	*Related Impact on University Ranking Inequalities*	*Mechanisms of Impact*	*Mitigation Strategies (for Universities)*
Financial Risk	- Unequal access to funding based on perceived "prestige" (ESG equivalent). - Volatility in student enrollment due to ranking fluctuations. - Misallocation of resources based on ranking-driven metrics.	- Divergent ranking methodologies create inconsistent perceptions of institutional quality. - Lack of standardized "academic ESG" (e.g., social mobility impact) metrics hinders accurate assessment. - "Prestige" driven funding leads to "rich get richer" scenario.	- Advocate for more holistic ranking methodologies. - Diversify funding sources beyond rankings. - Invest in resources to improve social mobility and equity metrics. - Transparency in resource allocation.
Reputational Risk	- Damage to reputation from perceived lack of commitment to equity and inclusion. - Loss of trust from underrepresented communities. - Increased scrutiny from student activists and social media.	- Ranking disparities create opportunities for accusations of elitism. - Conflicting perceptions of institutional values undermine credibility. - Social media amplifies negative perceptions of inequity.	- Proactive communication of equity and inclusion initiatives. - Engage with underrepresented communities. - Publicly report diversity and equity data. - Address negative perceptions quickly and transparently.
Operational Risk	- Difficulty attracting and retaining diverse faculty and students. - Increased regulatory scrutiny regarding equity compliance. - Challenges in creating inclusive learning environments.	- Ranking disparities create challenges in managing diverse student and faculty populations. - Varying interpretations of equity regulations lead to compliance risks. - Talent pools are increasingly focused on inclusive institutions.	- Implement inclusive hiring and admissions practices. - Robust internal equity compliance programs. - Foster a culture of inclusion and belonging. - Regular audits of operational equity impacts.

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Table 5. Continued

Category of Risk (from ESG)	*Related Impact on University Ranking Inequalities*	*Mechanisms of Impact*	*Mitigation Strategies (for Universities)*
Legal and Regulatory Risk	- Increased potential for litigation due to discrimination claims. - Fines and penalties from non-compliance with equity regulations. - Uncertainty in navigating differing regional equity standards.	- Lack of clarity in equity reporting leads to legal vulnerabilities. - Regulatory bodies struggle to keep pace with evolving equity practices. - Disparities create confusion in cross-border collaborations.	- Legal counsel specializing in equity compliance. - Active participation in equity regulatory development. - Robust risk management frameworks for equity-related litigation. - Monitoring and adapting to changing regulations.
Strategic Risk	- Misaligned strategic decisions due to reliance on narrow ranking metrics. - Failure to adapt to changing societal expectations regarding equity. - Loss of competitive advantage due to perceived lack of social responsibility.	- Disparities hinder accurate assessment of long-term equity trends. - Universities may miss emerging opportunities to promote social mobility. - Students and funders increasingly prioritize social impact.	- Integrate equity and social mobility into core institutional strategy. - Continuous monitoring and adaptation of equity goals. - Invest in initiatives that promote social mobility. - Benchmark against best practices in equity and inclusion.

6) MITIGATING THE NEGATIVE IMPACTS

Promoting a holistic approach to evaluating academic achievement

Diversifying evaluation metrics is crucial for mitigating the negative impacts of narrow ranking systems and fostering a more holistic view of academic achievement. By emphasizing qualitative measures alongside quantitative data, institutions can move beyond simple numerical rankings to capture the rich tapestry of academic contributions. Incorporating metrics related to teaching quality, community engagement, and social impact allows for a broader assessment of institutional value, recognizing the importance of factors beyond research output. Furthermore, developing metrics to assess student well-being and personal growth acknowledges the crucial role of mental health and holistic development in the educational experience. Implementing this diversified approach, through rubrics, surveys, and tracking initiatives, leads to a reduced reliance on narrow metrics, a more accurate representation of institutional

value, an increased focus on teaching and social impact, and improved student mental health and holistic development (Salim et al., 2024).

Promoting transparency and context in academic rankings is essential for fostering a more informed and nuanced understanding of institutional performance. By providing detailed explanations of ranking methodologies, institutions and ranking organizations can demystify the process and clarify the limitations of numerical assessments (Adam, 2024). Publishing contextual data alongside rankings, such as student demographics and resource availability, allows for a more comprehensive evaluation of institutional achievements, recognizing the diverse challenges and opportunities faced by different universities. Encouraging institutions to highlight their unique strengths and missions further promotes a culture of appreciation for diversity and individuality within the academic landscape. Implementing these strategies through clear reports, institutional profiles, and open forums leads to increased public understanding of rankings, reduced misinterpretation of data, and a greater appreciation for the diverse contributions of academic institutions.

Reducing the overemphasis on rankings requires a paradigm shift towards internal quality assurance and collaborative growth. By encouraging institutions to develop robust internal frameworks for self-assessment, they can cultivate a culture of continuous improvement aligned with their unique missions and values, rather than solely reacting to external metrics. Promoting collaborative initiatives and knowledge sharing over competition fosters a sense of collective advancement, allowing institutions to learn from each other's strengths and challenges (Matlis et al., 2024). Shifting the focus from external validation to internal improvement empowers institutions to prioritize their core educational and research goals, leading to a reduced pressure to "chase" rankings, an increased focus on institutional mission and values, and enhanced collaboration and knowledge sharing within the academic community.

Supporting student and faculty well-being is paramount in mitigating the negative impacts of ranking pressures. Implementing comprehensive mental health support services, such as counseling centers and peer support groups, provides essential resources for those struggling with stress and anxiety. Promoting work-life balance through flexible work policies and reduced administrative burdens acknowledges the importance of personal time and prevents burnout (Çağlayan et al., 2025). Providing training on stress management and resilience equips individuals with practical tools to navigate academic challenges effectively. These strategies collectively contribute to improved student and faculty mental health, reduced burnout, increased job satisfaction, and ultimately, enhanced academic performance and creativity, fostering a healthier and more productive academic environment.

Addressing inequalities within academia demands proactive measures to create a more equitable and just system. Implementing affirmative action policies and targeted

support programs helps to level the playing field for underrepresented students and faculty, providing them with the necessary resources and opportunities to succeed. Providing resources to institutions serving underrepresented communities ensures that these institutions have the capacity to provide quality education and support to their students (Hubbard, 2024). Advocating for equitable funding and resource allocation challenges systemic disparities and ensures that all institutions have the necessary resources to thrive. These strategies, implemented through diversity and inclusion plans, scholarship and mentorship programs, and policy advocacy, contribute to increased diversity and inclusion in academia, reduced disparities in access to education and resources, and ultimately, a more equitable and just academic system.

Table 6 outlines strategies to counteract the adverse effects of ranking systems by advocating for a more comprehensive evaluation of academic achievement. It emphasizes diversifying metrics, promoting transparency, reducing ranking dependency, supporting well-being, and addressing inequalities to cultivate a healthier, more equitable academic environment.

Table 6. Mitigating Negative Impacts of Rankings & Promoting Holistic Evaluation

Area of Focus	*Mitigation Strategies*	*Implementation Methods*	*Expected Outcomes*
Diversifying Evaluation Metrics	- Emphasize qualitative measures alongside quantitative data. - Include metrics on teaching quality, community engagement, and social impact. - Develop metrics to assess student well-being and personal growth.	- Develop rubrics for assessing qualitative contributions. - Conduct student and faculty surveys on teaching effectiveness and engagement. - Track community engagement initiatives and their impact. - Implement student well-being surveys and support systems.	- Reduced reliance on narrow metrics. - More accurate representation of institutional value. - Increased focus on teaching and social impact. - Improved student mental health and holistic development.
Promoting Transparency and Context	- Provide detailed explanations of ranking methodologies. - Publish contextual data alongside rankings (e.g., student demographics, resource availability). - Encourage institutions to highlight their unique strengths and missions.	- Develop clear and accessible ranking reports. - Create institutional profiles with contextual data. - Organize forums for discussing institutional missions and values.	- Increased public understanding of rankings. - Reduced misinterpretation of ranking data. - Greater appreciation for institutional diversity.
Reducing Emphasis on Rankings	- Encourage institutions to develop internal quality assurance frameworks. - Promote collaborative initiatives and knowledge sharing over competition. - Shift focus from external validation to internal improvement.	- Implement self-assessment processes. - Organize inter-institutional workshops and conferences. - Develop institutional strategic plans focused on internal goals.	- Reduced pressure to "chase" rankings. - Increased focus on institutional mission and values. - Enhanced collaboration and knowledge sharing.
Supporting Student and Faculty Well-being	- Implement mental health support services. - Promote work-life balance and reduce academic stress. - Provide training on stress management and resilience.	- Establish counseling centers and peer support groups. - Implement flexible work policies and reduce administrative burdens. - Organize workshops on mindfulness and stress reduction.	- Improved student and faculty mental health. - Reduced burnout and increased job satisfaction. - Enhanced academic performance and creativity.
Addressing Inequalities	- Implement affirmative action policies and targeted support programs. - Provide resources to institutions serving underrepresented communities. - Advocate for equitable funding and resource allocation.	- Develop and implement diversity and inclusion plans. - Establish scholarship programs and mentorship initiatives. - Lobby for policy changes and funding reforms.	- Increased diversity and inclusion in academia. - Reduced disparities in access to education and resources. - More equitable and just academic system.

Promoting Institutional Cultures Prioritizing Well-being Over Rankings

Establishing a culture that prioritizes well-being over rankings begins with strong leadership and clearly articulated values. Institutions must actively demonstrate their commitment to well-being by integrating it into their core mission and strategic plans, ensuring it's not merely an afterthought. Leaders must not only communicate this commitment but also embody it, prioritizing work-life balance and serving as role models for healthy habits. Implementing this through well-being statements, strategic planning sessions, and leadership training on empathy and well-being fosters a fundamental shift in institutional culture, increasing awareness and buy-in from faculty and students, and establishing a foundation where well-being is valued alongside academic achievement (Adam, 2024).

Transforming academic policies and practices is essential for fostering a well-being-centered institution. By reducing administrative burdens on both faculty and students, institutions can alleviate unnecessary stress and free up time for more meaningful academic pursuits (Kang & Mok, 2024). Implementing flexible work and study arrangements acknowledges the diverse needs of the academic community and promotes a healthier work-life balance. Shifting from a competitive to a collaborative culture encourages teamwork and mutual support, fostering a more positive and productive environment. Crucially, re-evaluating tenure and promotion criteria to include contributions to well-being signals a fundamental shift in values, recognizing that a thriving academic community is built on more than just research output. These changes, implemented through streamlined processes, flexible policies, collaborative initiatives, and revised evaluation criteria, lead to reduced stress and burnout, increased job satisfaction and productivity, enhanced collaboration, and a genuine recognition of well-being as a valuable academic contribution.

A fundamental component of prioritizing well-being is the provision of robust support services and resources (Núnez Chicharro et al., 2024). Expanding access to mental health counseling and support addresses the growing need for psychological assistance within academic communities. Providing training on stress management, mindfulness, and resilience equips individuals with practical tools to navigate the pressures of academic life. Creating dedicated well-being spaces and programs fosters a sense of community and provides designated areas for relaxation and rejuvenation. Implementing these strategies through increased funding for counseling, organized workshops and seminars, and the development of well-being centers leads to improved mental health and well-being among faculty and students, increased utilization of support services, and the development of enhanced coping skills and resilience.

Cultivating a strong sense of community and belonging is crucial for fostering a well-being-centered institution (Patka et al., 2024). By actively fostering a sense of

community among faculty and students, institutions can combat feelings of isolation and alienation, creating a supportive and inclusive environment. Promoting inclusive and equitable environments ensures that all members of the academic community feel valued and respected, regardless of their background or identity. Encouraging peer support and mentorship provides valuable opportunities for connection, guidance, and shared learning experiences. Implementing these strategies through organized social events, diversity and inclusion initiatives, and peer mentoring programs leads to reduced feelings of isolation, an increased sense of belonging and support, and enhanced social connections and overall well-being within the academic community.

Open communication and transparency are vital for the success of well-being initiatives within academic institutions (Ramírez & Montero, 2024). By communicating openly and transparently about these initiatives, institutions build trust and ensure that faculty and students are informed about available resources and support. Providing regular updates on progress and challenges demonstrates accountability and fosters a sense of shared responsibility. Actively seeking feedback from faculty and students through surveys, focus groups, and feedback mechanisms ensures that well-being programs are responsive to the needs of the community and continuously improved. Implementing these strategies through well-developed communication plans leads to increased awareness and understanding of well-being initiatives, enhanced trust and engagement, and the continuous improvement of programs designed to support the mental and emotional health of the academic community.

Table 7 details strategies for universities to prioritize well-being over rankings, focusing on leadership, policies, support services, community, and communication. By implementing these methods, institutions can cultivate a culture that values mental health and holistic development, fostering a more supportive and productive academic environment.

Table 7. Promoting Institutional Cultures Prioritizing Well-being Over Rankings

Area of Focus	*Strategies*	*Implementation Methods*	*Expected Outcomes*
Leadership and Values	- Articulate and communicate a clear institutional commitment to well-being. - Integrate well-being into the institution's mission and strategic plan. - Lead by example: prioritize work-life balance among leadership.	- Develop and disseminate a well-being statement. - Conduct strategic planning sessions focused on well-being. - Implement leadership training on well-being and empathy.	- Shift in institutional culture towards valuing well-being. - Increased awareness and buy-in from faculty and students. - Leaders serve as role models for healthy work habits.
Academic Policies and Practices	- Reduce administrative burdens on faculty and students. - Implement flexible work and study arrangements. - Promote a culture of collaboration over competition. - Re-evaluate tenure and promotion criteria to include well-being contributions.	- Streamline administrative processes. - Implement remote work/study policies. - Organize collaborative research and teaching initiatives. - Revise faculty handbooks and evaluation forms.	- Reduced stress and burnout among faculty and students. - Increased job satisfaction and productivity. - Enhanced collaboration and collegiality. - Recognition of well-being as a valuable academic contribution.
Support Services and Resources	- Expand access to mental health counseling and support. - Provide training on stress management, mindfulness, and resilience. - Create dedicated well-being spaces and programs.	- Increase funding for counseling services. - Organize workshops and seminars. - Develop well-being centers and programs.	- Improved mental health and well-being among faculty and students. - Increased utilization of support services. - Enhanced coping skills and resilience.

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Table 7. Continued

Area of Focus	*Strategies*	*Implementation Methods*	*Expected Outcomes*
Community and Belonging	- Foster a sense of community and belonging among faculty and students. - Promote inclusive and equitable environments. - Encourage peer support and mentorship.	- Organize social events and community-building activities. - Implement diversity and inclusion initiatives. - Establish peer mentoring programs.	- Reduced feelings of isolation and alienation. - Increased sense of belonging and support. - Enhanced social connections and well-being.
Communication and Transparency	- Communicate openly and transparently about well-being initiatives. - Provide regular updates on progress and challenges. - Seek feedback from faculty and students on well-being initiatives.	- Develop well-being communication plans. - Conduct regular surveys and focus groups. - Establish feedback mechanisms.	- Increased awareness and understanding of well-being initiatives. - Enhanced trust and engagement. - Continuous improvement of well-being programs.

The Importance of Educating Students and Faculty on the Limitations of Ranking Systems

Understanding the mechanics of ranking systems is crucial for both students and faculty. By providing clear explanations of the metrics used, discussions of weighting impacts, and analyses of data collection biases, institutions can demystify the ranking process (Abacıoğlu et al., 2024). Implementing workshops, guest lectures, online resources, and critical report analyses equips individuals with the ability to critically evaluate ranking data. This education fosters increased awareness of how rankings are constructed, enabling a reduced reliance on them as the sole measure of academic quality and promoting a more informed perspective on institutional evaluation.

Recognizing the inherent limitations of ranking metrics is essential for developing a balanced perspective on academic evaluation (Crompton, 2025). By engaging in discussions about what rankings omit, such as teaching quality, student experiences, and social impact, institutions can highlight the narrow scope of these assessments. Analyzing how rankings can incentivize undesirable behaviors, like "gaming" the system, reveals the potential for unintended consequences. Exploring the subjective nature of "quality" underscores that academic excellence is multifaceted and cannot be fully captured by numerical values. Implementing panel discussions, case studies, and debates fosters a more nuanced understanding of academic value, reduces the pressure to conform to narrow ranking criteria, and increases appreciation for the diverse missions of academic institutions.

Contextualizing ranking data is crucial for understanding its true meaning and impact (Ramadhan & Sarwono, 2024). Emphasizing the importance of considering institutional context, such as resources and student demographics, helps reveal the limitations of raw numerical comparisons. Discussing how rankings can perpetuate inequalities highlights the potential for bias and the need for a more equitable assessment framework. Exploring alternative measures of success, like student growth and community impact, broadens the definition of academic achievement. Implementing data visualization workshops, social impact presentations, and contextual institutional profiles allows for a more nuanced interpretation of rankings, increases awareness of potential biases, and shifts towards a more equitable view of academic success.

Developing critical thinking skills is fundamental for navigating the complexities of academic evaluations, including rankings (Rafique et al., 2024). By providing training on how to evaluate information sources and identify biases, institutions empower students and faculty to approach data with a discerning eye. Encouraging skepticism and questioning authority fosters intellectual curiosity and promotes a culture of inquiry. Promoting independent research and critical analysis equips individuals with the tools to form their own informed perspectives. Implementing critical thinking workshops, research assignments, and faculty-led discussions enhances the ability to critically evaluate rankings, facilitates the development of independent viewpoints, and increases engagement with academic discourse, ultimately leading to a more intellectually robust academic community.

Promoting holistic evaluation is essential for moving beyond the narrow confines of ranking systems and recognizing the multifaceted nature of academic success (Basheer et al., 2024). By emphasizing the importance of qualitative measures and non-quantifiable contributions, institutions can acknowledge the value of diverse academic achievements beyond numerical metrics. Exploring alternative evaluation frameworks, such as portfolios and narrative evaluations, provides more comprehensive and nuanced assessments of individual and institutional performance. Emphasizing the value of personal growth and well-being highlights the importance of a supportive and nurturing academic environment. Implementing workshops on alternative evaluation methods, presentations on holistic evaluation benefits, and student/faculty forums fosters a shift towards a more balanced and comprehensive view of academic success, increases appreciation for diverse forms of achievement, and promotes a healthier, more supportive academic environment.

Table 8 outlines the educational strategies needed to equip students and faculty with a critical understanding of ranking systems. By focusing on methodologies, limitations, and context, institutions can foster a more informed and balanced perspective on academic evaluation. This approach promotes critical thinking and encourages a shift towards a more holistic view of academic achievement.

Table 8. Educating Students and Faculty on the Limitations of Ranking Systems

Area of Education	*Content Focus*	*Implementation Methods*	*Expected Outcomes*
Understanding Ranking Methodologies	- Explanation of the metrics used in different ranking systems. - Discussion of the weighting of those metrics and its impact. - Analysis of how data is collected and potential biases.	- Workshops and seminars on ranking methodologies. - Guest lectures from ranking organizations or experts. - Online modules and resources explaining ranking processes. - Critical analysis of published ranking reports.	- Increased awareness of the mechanics of rankings. - Ability to critically evaluate ranking data. - Reduced reliance on rankings as the sole measure of quality.
Recognizing the Limitations of Metrics	- Discussion of what rankings *don't* measure (e.g., teaching quality, student experience, social impact). - Analysis of how rankings can incentivize undesirable behavior (e.g., "gaming" the system). - Exploration of the subjective nature of "quality."	- Panel discussions featuring diverse academic perspectives. - Case studies of institutions that prioritize non-ranked metrics. - Debates and discussions on the value of different academic contributions.	- Development of a more nuanced understanding of academic value. - Reduced pressure to conform to narrow ranking criteria. - Increased appreciation for diverse institutional missions.
Contextualizing Ranking Data	- Emphasis on the importance of considering institutional context (e.g., resources, student demographics). - Discussion of how rankings can perpetuate inequalities. - Exploration of alternative measures of success (e.g., student growth, community impact).	- Data visualization workshops to demonstrate the impact of context. - Presentations on the social and economic impact of higher education. - Development of institutional profiles that highlight contextual factors.	- Ability to interpret rankings within a broader context. - Increased awareness of the potential for bias in rankings. - Shift towards a more equitable view of academic achievement.

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Table 8. Continued

Area of Education	*Content Focus*	*Implementation Methods*	*Expected Outcomes*
Developing Critical Thinking Skills	- Training on how to evaluate information sources and identify biases. - Encouragement of skepticism and questioning of authority. - Promotion of independent research and critical analysis.	- Critical thinking workshops and courses. - Research assignments that require critical evaluation of data. - Faculty-led discussions on current issues in higher education.	- Enhanced ability to think critically about rankings and other academic evaluations. - Development of informed and independent perspectives. - Increased engagement with academic discourse.
Promoting Holistic Evaluation	- Discussion of the importance of qualitative measures and non-quantifiable contributions. - Exploration of alternative evaluation frameworks (e.g., portfolios, narrative evaluations). - Emphasis on the value of personal growth and well-being.	- Workshops on developing and using alternative evaluation methods. - Presentations on the benefits of holistic evaluation. - Student and faculty forums on the future of academic evaluation.	- Shift towards a more balanced and comprehensive view of academic success. - Increased appreciation for diverse forms of academic achievement. - Promotion of a healthier and more supportive academic environment.

7) CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored the significant psychological toll that academic rankings exact on both students and faculty. By examining the mechanisms through which rankings influence self-perception, motivation, and mental health, we have demonstrated how these numerical evaluations can create a culture of anxiety, competition, and distorted perceptions of academic worth. The relentless pursuit of higher rankings, while intended to drive excellence, often overshadows the intrinsic value of learning and scholarship, leading to detrimental effects on individual well-being and the overall academic environment.

It is crucial to adopt a critical perspective on the role of rankings in higher education. While rankings may serve as a useful tool for comparing institutions and tracking performance, they should not be the sole determinant of academic value. We must recognize the limitations of these metrics and acknowledge the diverse contributions of students and faculty that cannot be easily quantified. A more holistic approach to evaluation, one that emphasizes qualitative measures, community engagement, and social impact, is necessary to foster a healthier and more equitable academic landscape.

Further research is needed to fully understand the psychological impact of rankings and to develop effective strategies for mitigating their negative effects. Studies exploring the experiences of marginalized groups, the long-term consequences of ranking pressures, and the efficacy of alternative evaluation methods are essential for informing policy and practice. By continuing to examine the human cost of rankings, we can work towards creating an academic environment that prioritizes well-being, fosters genuine learning, and celebrates the multifaceted nature of academic achievement.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Academic Achievement: The level of success attained in academic pursuits, often measured by grades, test scores, research publications, and other indicators, all which are used in rankings.

Academic Integrity: The ethical policies and practices regarding honesty and original research in scholarship. Pressures from rankings can sometimes cause breaches of academic integrity.

Academic Pressure: The stress and demands placed on students and faculty to achieve high academic performance, often driven by the desire to improve or maintain rankings.

Anxiety: A feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease, typically about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome, frequently triggered by the perceived high stakes of rankings.

Faculty: Academic staff members at higher education institutions, including professors, lecturers, and researchers, who are also evaluated and impacted by ranking systems.

Higher Education: Refers to tertiary education provided by universities, colleges, and other institutions of learning beyond secondary school.

Institutional Rankings: Evaluations that compare and order universities or colleges as a whole, based on a range of criteria.

Mental Health: A state of well-being in which individuals realize their abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and can contribute to their communities, which can be negatively affected by ranking pressures.

Performance Metrics: Quantifiable measures used to assess academic achievement, research output, and other indicators of success, which form the basis of rankings.

Psychological Impact: The effects of rankings on the mental and emotional well-being of individuals within the academic community, including students and faculty.

Rankings: In the context of higher education, rankings are systems that evaluate and order institutions, departments, or individuals based on various performance metrics. These metrics often include research output, student satisfaction, reputation, and other quantifiable factors.

Self-Esteem: An individual's sense of self-worth or personal value, which can be negatively impacted by unfavorable rankings or the constant pressure to improve one's standing.

Social Comparison: The process of comparing oneself to others, which can be intensified by rankings and lead to feelings of inadequacy or superiority.

Stress: A state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances, often exacerbated by the competitive nature of rankings.

Students: Individuals enrolled in educational programs at higher education institutions, who are subject to the pressures and expectations associated with rankings.

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