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## University Rankings: A Tool for Enhancing the Quality of Higher Education Institutions

Alina Zhumagulova<sup>1</sup>, Bekbosun Borubashov<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

*This article explores the role of university rankings in enhancing the quality of higher education, with a focus on aligning it with the needs of learners, employers, and other stakeholders. The study investigates the relationship between rankings and the diversity of stakeholders interested in higher education quality. Rankings are viewed as an institutional mechanism for upgrading higher education quality while satisfying the interests of stakeholders. The study identifies two important methodological approaches to improve rankings within the research objectives. Firstly, it suggests using the legal framework and the customer-focused approach of the ISO 9000 standards system to determine higher education quality. Secondly, a detailed analysis of stakeholders and their interests is proposed as a basis for enhancing education quality. It is recommended to strengthen the interaction of rankings with different stakeholder groups while maintaining the objectivity of the ranking. In summary, the proposed approaches provide a more sophisticated theoretical and legal framework that allows for the organic integration of education quality into global frameworks for assessing the quality of all goods and services. The results obtained have practical significance, as they can facilitate the effectiveness of university rankings in improving higher education quality.*

**Keywords:** *University rankings, accreditation, academic rankings, quality mechanisms, higher education quality, educational evaluation, quality management standards, stakeholders, competencies.*

### **Introduction**

University rankings are widely recognised as an effective mechanism in higher education, serving as indicators of education service markets and the alignment of higher education frameworks and institutions with the needs of learners, society, employers, and other stakeholders. With the proliferation of rankings and their increasing impact on higher education, the aim of this study is to analyse international experiences and assess the relationship between rankings and the various stakeholders involved in higher education quality. Additionally, this study aims to examine rankings as an institutional mechanism for enhancing the quality of higher education and propose new approaches for the use of international experience in the evolution of university rankings in Kazakhstan and the Central Asian region.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to a deeper understanding of the interrelationships involved in university rankings and their use by stakeholders to improve higher education quality, resulting in tangible benefits to the economy and society.

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<sup>1</sup> PhD in Law, Director General, Independent Agency for Accreditation and Rating, 010010, 2 B. Momysuly Ave., Astana, the Republic of the Kazakhstan, \*Corresponding author's Email: [alina.zhumagulova23@mail.ru](mailto:alina.zhumagulova23@mail.ru), Orcid Id 0000-0002-1289-1723

<sup>2</sup> Doctor of Law, Candidate of Historical Sciences, Professor, Head of the Department of, International and Constitutional Law of the Law Faculty, Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University, 720000, 42 Chui Ave., Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic, Email: [bibekbosun@gmail.com](mailto:bibekbosun@gmail.com), Orcid Id 0000-0001-5624-7000

## Literature Review

It is a well-established view in the academic literature that the “era of university rankings” commenced at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the launch of the world’s leading rankings. These usually include QS World University Rankings, Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE), Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) and others. They have ensured a growing interest of both higher education stakeholders and society at large in this form of higher education evaluation. They have also fuelled the evolution of national and regional rankings.

Since then, rankings have attracted high and not always unequivocal attention from researchers trying to understand their nature and to understand the not yet fully resolved contradictions and shortcomings.

Among numerous publications in this field, we can single out, first and foremost, the papers of E. Hazelkorn (Hazelkorn, 2013; Hazelkorn *et al.*, 2014), which have played a systematic role in interpreting the results of the first decade of the “era of university rankings”. At that, the second of these papers had the status of the first pan-European study of the impact of rankings on European higher education institutions.

These papers highlighted the theoretical underpinnings of the generation of rankings, stressing that they have had an enormous impact on higher education and the possibility of international comparison.

It was noted that rankings have increased political and investment interest in higher education, influence stakeholder behaviour, provide incentives for universities to modernise, spur useful discussions on the quality of education, measuring efficiency and impact of higher education.

Significant information has been provided in the reports of the European University Association (Rauhvargers, 2011; Rauhvargers, 2013).

They note the growing trend of rankings and the need for their specialisation; the high level of recognition among stakeholders and society; the more accurate reflection of research than teaching by global rankings; the increasing influence on public policy, higher education policy, public opinion, and universities.

The existence of disadvantages and biases was pointed out. One important problem is recognised as “both society and policy makers are tempted to judge all higher education in the world by the standards that rankings use to detect the two **research universities**, rather than applying one of the core principles of quality assurance - the 'fitness for purpose' principle.

It is concluded that not only research universities, but also regional universities and those focused on mass access to higher education deserve attention.

Further research reveals both new achievements and several ambiguities.

Such functionalities of education quality and rankings have been noted as participation in gaining political and socio-economic advantages, building knowledge economy, increasing competitiveness, use as indicators of economic, security and social development (Elbawab, 2022; Zoljargal, 2018).

The authors also emphasise the direct impact of a HEI’s ranking and image on the opportunities for education export (Cadogan *et al.*, 2001). This factor is important not only for a HEI, but also for the country as a whole (Buckner, 2019).

The publications (Soysal et al., 2022; Marques and Powell, 2020) note another aspect of the influence of rankings: they “help perpetuate cognitive self-constructions of universities and students as rational, goal-oriented agents”.

This means that rankings are valuable not only by standards of assessment, but also by creating confidence in those using and investing in them in their ability to work purposefully as actors in the field.

Rankings are increasingly being used by governments and non-governmental organisations to allocate funding to higher education institutions (Marques and Powell, 2020; Fauzi et al., 2020).

Several authors consider it an indication of the success of HEIs’ rankings that universities include improved ranking positions in their mission statements, believing this to be an indicator of their commitment to excellence. It is stressed that rankings intensify competition between universities and the publication of their results transforms a stable status order into a dynamic competitive field (Soysal et al., 2022; Brankovic et al., 2018). Studies have shown that applicants and their parents rely on university rankings when choosing higher education.

### **However, Several Shortcomings have also been Identified**

For instance, despite their widespread use, we still know little about the extent and impact of rankings on higher education outcomes (Soysal et al., 2022). Whether the rankings can work meritocratically to offset the impact of an established reputation.

It has also been noted: “Our findings show that recruitment of international students is primarily determined by university reputation, socially mediated and sedimented over the long term, rather than by universities yearly updated ranking positions. We conclude that while there is insufficient evidence that improving rankings changes universities international recruitment outcomes, they are nevertheless consequential for universities and students as strategic actors investing in rankings as purpose and identity” (Soysal et al., 2022).

It has been stressed that rankings do not assess universities from all perspectives. Many comments have been made about ranking weights and the fact that universities from developing countries in the Asian and African regions find it difficult to compete, creating a notion of ‘unfairness’ in the rankings (Fauzi et al., 2020).

The suitability of university rankings for use in improving research has been criticised in the paper (Vernon et al., 2018). Proposals have been made to abandon the limited quantitative assessment of the scientific value of a HEI, e.g., by the number of publications and citations. And the need to develop better multi-factor assessments is emphasised. The frequent failure to consider the impact on society or the quality of teaching is also criticised (Ali, 2022).

Of particular interest is frequently discussed question of whether university rankings and accreditation are related and whether university rankings are objective. Here the criticism of rankings is noticeably greater than that of accreditation. Thus, in the publication (Morin, 2019) ratings are criticised for an unjustified selection of experts, for their susceptibility to influential opinions.

In Yadav P. (Yadav, 2021) it is emphasised that “accreditation is “actually the process through which a university is given official recognition by a government body or other authorities”.

It has been pointed out that in many countries’ university accreditation is a necessary requirement for the award of a degree. The author of the said publication believes that this is

the main difference between ranking and accreditation, as no such requirement applies to rankings.

However, there are many rankings produced by the listing method and differing criteria, and they benefit different students in different fields. Rankings are useful for strategic planning of educational activities and increasing institutional transparency, as well as encouraging a culture of quality in education.

Overall, we believe that the process of identifying and discussing the shortcomings of rankings in academic literature and journalism is very useful. Over the last 20 years it has already led to their real minimisation in several ways. The disadvantages are in principle avoidable. They do not detract from the merits of the already established global system of university rankings, supported by the real interest and support of many people, organisations, and society at large. Therefore, their improvement should be continued, with successive reductions in their shortcomings.

We support the view of the authors (Fauzi *et al.*, 2020) that “no ranking tool should be considered as perfect, and continuous improvement should be called for”.

Researchers are persistently seeking and finding prospective directions for studying and improving the rating framework. In this respect, we have found it appealing to enhance the importance and usefulness of university rankings for all their stakeholders. This is related to the already mentioned “fitness for purpose” principle, which correlates strongly with the following fact. It has been pointed out in papers (Marginson, 2014; Gonçalves and Calderón, 2017) there is a serious dissonance: together with the large number of studies on the characteristics and limitations of rankings, there are very few scientific papers on the effects of ranking on society and universities. And, that there is little criticism of rankings from the social sciences.

This aspect has given us the impetus to develop research that raises important questions about the relationship of rankings to scientific foundations and fundamental approaches to quality in education. This includes a serious scientific approach to defining the quality of higher education in its organic relationship with the quality of other goods and services, where not only educational science but also economic and social research is important. And, with a basic framework for engaging with a wide range of stakeholders in this quality. This should be emphasised in the development of university rankings.

## Methods

The research methods used include document review using such types of analysis as: comparative, factor, conceptual, functional, systematic.

The methods of analogy and theoretical modelling of the actual and desired state of the object under study were also applied.

Also was used the method of comparing the provisions, conclusions, and recommendations of the study with practice in the development of rating and accreditation activities (including national and regional rankings) of Kazakhstan’s “Independent Agency for Accreditation and Rating” (IAAR), which is headed by one of the authors of this study.

## Results and Discussion

One of the key strategic aims of university rankings should be to improve the quality, demand, and ultimate impact of higher education. Various approaches to defining the quality of education are discussed in the academic literature, with many emphasizing the needs of learners and their satisfaction with education services (Zhumagulova, 2018).

However, higher education represents the final stage of the formal education framework and serves not only the needs of individuals but also the ability of graduates and universities to contribute to meeting the development needs of society, the economy, the social domain of the country, the region, and humanity. Therefore, the methodological and legal approach to solving the tasks set is based on the internationally accepted Quality Management framework of the International Organization for Standardization ISO 9000, 9001, and related standards.

Since most of the world's states are members of this organization, these standards are official documents of international law in the field of quality of goods and services. Their use in the field of higher education quality is not only permissible and useful but also fully legitimate, as they link higher education with the interests of the economy and society both *de jure* and *de facto* (ISO, 2022).

The basic principles of Quality Management outlined in the official ISO document are particularly important in this respect. Of great importance to us is the first principle in this document - Customer Focus (with the clarification - extended). It states: "The primary focus of quality management is to meet customer requirements and to strive to exceed customer expectations. Sustained success is achieved when an organization attracts and retains the confidence of customers and other interested parties... Understanding the current and future needs of customers and other interested parties contributes to the sustained success of the organization" (ISO, 2015).

Similar wording can be found in the international standard ISO 9000:2015, which emphasises the importance of considering all relevant stakeholders beyond just customers. We believe that these formulations, which reflect the tremendous analytical and practical work of the International Organization for Standardization ISO, are appropriate for applying to the quality of higher education as a supplier of qualified personnel for the economy and society (ISO, 2021).

**Ratings and Accreditation.** Accreditation of universities and study programs has been a widely recognised and thoroughly tested mechanism for quality assurance in higher education over the past decades. University rankings, in principle, are also one of the ultimate goals of quality assurance in higher education. However, their history is much shorter, and the mechanisms for influencing the quality of education are not yet entirely clear. Moreover, the levels of their objectivity are still subject to debate. Therefore, a comparative analysis of accreditation and rating mechanisms can help to better elucidate the role of ratings in the quality of higher education.

In this regard, the authors draw on the experience of the Independent Agency for Accreditation and Rating (IAAR) in Kazakhstan and the Central Asian region. IAAR simultaneously engages in both accreditation and rankings in the field of higher education, and its independent, transparent, and objective activity is ensured by the agency's internal quality system, high-quality personnel, wide expert potential (over 4,000 experts), and culture of interaction with public authorities in the field of education and national and international partners.

IAAR is registered in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) and is a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

The agency has strategic objectives and priorities, as below:

- Expanding international activities and experience exchange, using the world's best practices in this field.
- promoting internationalisation of national systems of higher education and quality assurance, bringing global trends in the development of educational services to the region.
- monitoring of higher education institutions and ranking studies at the national and regional scopes.
- creation of a dialogue platform for the formation of new policies for quality assurance in education.

IAAR has developed and conducts university rankings based on the Berlin Principles for Ranking of Higher Education Institutions (IREG Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence, 2019) and other documents of the internationally reputable Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence - IREG.

These include International Eurasian University Ranking (IAAR EUR), which considers the peculiarities of the educational systems of the Eurasian region and Central Asia, and the Independent Ranking of Higher Education Institutions in Demand in Kazakhstan.

Achievements of IAAR are recognised by IREG International Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence, and IAAR's ranking methodology was awarded the Seal of Approval "IREG-Approved".

Based on the experience of the agency and an analysis of scientific and academic publications, the following can be stated: It is commonly believed that accreditation agencies assess the quality of education in a relatively unbiased manner, whereas rankings tend to evaluate universities based on subjective criteria. The first part of this statement is true, but it needs to be clarified that the quality of education should satisfy the principle of broader customer focus - i.e., the interests of the maximum range of stakeholders.

Accreditation copes with this by trying to meet the interests of various stakeholders, such as learners, universities, state and society, employers, international organisations, and international accreditation communities and centres. The key point is that international accreditation serves as an effective conduit of global experience in higher education and promotes new quality.

The range of stakeholders in higher education accreditation is broad and not limited to the direct recipients of the service - the students, although they are of paramount importance. Moreover, there is a growing need to be responsive to the demands of an evolving economy and society, especially the main consumers of trained personnel - employers.

Regarding the second part of the statement, the "subjectivity" of rankings should not be taken too literally. The impression of "subjectivity" here is superficial. If the rankings and their criteria were of no interest to anyone (except the compilers), if the rankings did not meet the interests of significant groups of the population (other than students), they would not have acquired the degree of popularity and attention they currently have.

Therefore, it is highly probable that the rankings and their criteria already reflect the fundamentally objective needs and interests of stakeholders, including investors in the sector



of higher education. Contact with them is inevitable, which means that their influence on rankings is quite possible. Since meeting stakeholders' interests is an integral part of quality, rankings become a more objective mechanism, rather than "pure subjectivity," that affects the quality of education.

However, to achieve full quality, it is necessary to consider the interests of the widest possible range of stakeholders, which is not yet the case with rankings. Expanding the circle of stakeholders whose interests will be considered should be viewed as an important task for further development of the rating system in higher education. This approach will increase the objectivity of rankings and the validity of decisions made based on rankings.

Unfortunately, a detailed and systematic analysis of multiple stakeholders and their interests in scientific publications is rare.

We have tried to fill this gap to some extent. Our analysis has demonstrated that stakeholders in higher education and its quality include and have the following interests:

- applicants and their parents, students, doctoral students - choice of university for study, academic mobility, assessment of future employment.
- professors and lecturers, academics - choice of place of work, academic and scientific mobility, research activities.
- employers (public authorities, business organisations and others) - choice of universities when making decisions on hiring employees, for their target training, retraining, professional development.
- investors - to select the objects for investment.
- public and non-governmental funding bodies and sponsors - for funding and sponsorship decisions.
- public and private customers, foreign and international organisations - to select universities and their science and innovation structures for research, commercialisation of results and innovation developments.
- universities - to attract students and teachers, for promotional purposes, in press releases, presentations and websites, to improve the objectives and strategy, content and management of their educational, scientific, and innovative activities, to enhance their competitiveness.
- universities and their potential partners - to develop cooperation, including international cooperation.
- the state - to participate in the global competition and development of education and science policy.
- the state, politicians and political structures, mass media - for shaping public opinion.

The list of stakeholders provided in this study may not be exhaustive, and further research is needed to supplement it. However, these stakeholders have different interests in university rankings, which may sometimes coincide but often differ significantly. Rankings themselves are both objective and subjective, depending on the indicators and methods used, and on qualitative assessments made by experts. While this is both a disadvantage and an advantage, the potential flexibility of university rankings allows them to be more customizable to the interests of different stakeholder groups.

At a regional and national level, stakeholders' interests and aspirations may be more specific and divergent than at the global level. Therefore, a more focused platform for university

rankings, with specific criteria and parameters, could be more effective in improving the quality of higher education. Institutions such as the “IREG Observatory on Academic Rankings and Excellence” and global university rankings can provide valuable support and best practices to national and regional systems of higher education. However, more research is needed to develop mechanisms that better match the interests of different stakeholder groups. This should be a focus for individual universities, governments, and higher education systems looking to integrate more effectively into the global educational community. Kazakhstan is one of such countries, it became a full member of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in 2010. This fact was reflected in the Budapest-Vienna Declaration of EHEA (EHEA, 2010). Kazakhstan is the first Central Asian state recognised as a full member of the EHEA (Enic-Kazakhstan, 2022).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the study has analysed international experience to assess the relationship of rankings with stakeholders in the quality of higher education. The use of the legal framework and methodology of the extended customer-focused approach adopted in the authoritative international system of standards ISO 9000, 9001 to evaluate and define the quality of higher education was proposed. Additionally, the study presented an expanded list of stakeholders in higher education quality and rankings, as well as their targeted benchmarks.

The issue of objectivity and subjectivity of university rankings was discussed, proposing the strengthening of the interaction between rankings and stakeholders to increase interest and ensure a higher level of objectivity. Finally, the study emphasises the necessity of multiplicity and diversity of ratings due to the significant differences between target groups. These findings can help advance the quality of higher education and provide benefits to the economy and society.

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