

# Quick guide to *7 major* ranking reports

A concise overview of seven major global university rankings  
and their methodologies



# Contents

Understanding university rankings	3
Methodology and data disclaimer	3
Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)	4
CWTS Leiden Ranking (Traditional Edition)	6
QS World University Rankings	8
Times Higher Education World University Rankings	10
U.S. News & World Report – Best Global Universities	12
Times Higher Education Impact Rankings	14
QS World University Rankings by Subject	16
Closing & further resources	18

# Understanding university rankings

University rankings vary widely in scope and methodology, each shaped by distinct indicators and priorities. For institutions tracking rankings or developing a rankings strategy, understanding what each ranking measures – and how – is essential. Yet, with so many rankings available, navigating them can be challenging.

This guide offers an overview of several widely recognized university ranking systems to help you gain insight into their methodologies, data sources and contexts of use.

While rankings can highlight different university strengths, no single ranking tells the full story.

Universities pursue unique missions and goals, using data in different ways to communicate their strengths to students, faculty, partners and policymakers. Rankings are just one piece of that broader narrative.

## Methodology and data disclaimer

**Note:** Methodology information and data sources are current as of November 5, 2025. However, ranking methodologies are updated periodically by their respective organizations; therefore, indicator definitions, weights or data sources may change from year to year. The overviews provided in this guide are summarized based on each ranking body's web pages, for the most accurate and current information, readers should refer to the official methodology pages linked throughout this guide.

### Rankings covered:

- Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)
- CWTS Leiden Ranking (Traditional Edition)
- QS World University Rankings
- Times Higher Education World University Rankings
- U.S. News & World Report – Best Global Universities
- Times Higher Education Impact Rankings
- QS World University Rankings by Subject

# Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)

## Ranking organization:

ShanghaiRanking.

## Ranking report:

[Academic Ranking of World Universities \(ARWU\)](#).

## Report focus:

Global.

## Purpose statement:

To present the world's top 1,000 research universities annually based on a transparent methodology and objective third-party data.

## Scope:

More than 2,500 universities are evaluated annually; the results for the top 1,000 are published.

## Candidate universities:

Universities with significant research output. Any university having Nobel Laureates, Fields Medalists, Highly Cited Researchers (HiCi) or papers indexed in Nature, Science or the Web of Science Core Collection are included in the candidate pool.

## Data sources:

- Nobel Prizes (official Nobel site) and Fields Medals (International Mathematical Union) – alumni and staff counts
- Highly Cited Researchers list (HiCi) – Clarivate
- Bibliometrics: Nature and Science publications
- Bibliometrics: Web of Science-indexed publications
- National or institutional data for the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) academic staff

## Timing:

Annually (August).



## Ranking methodology

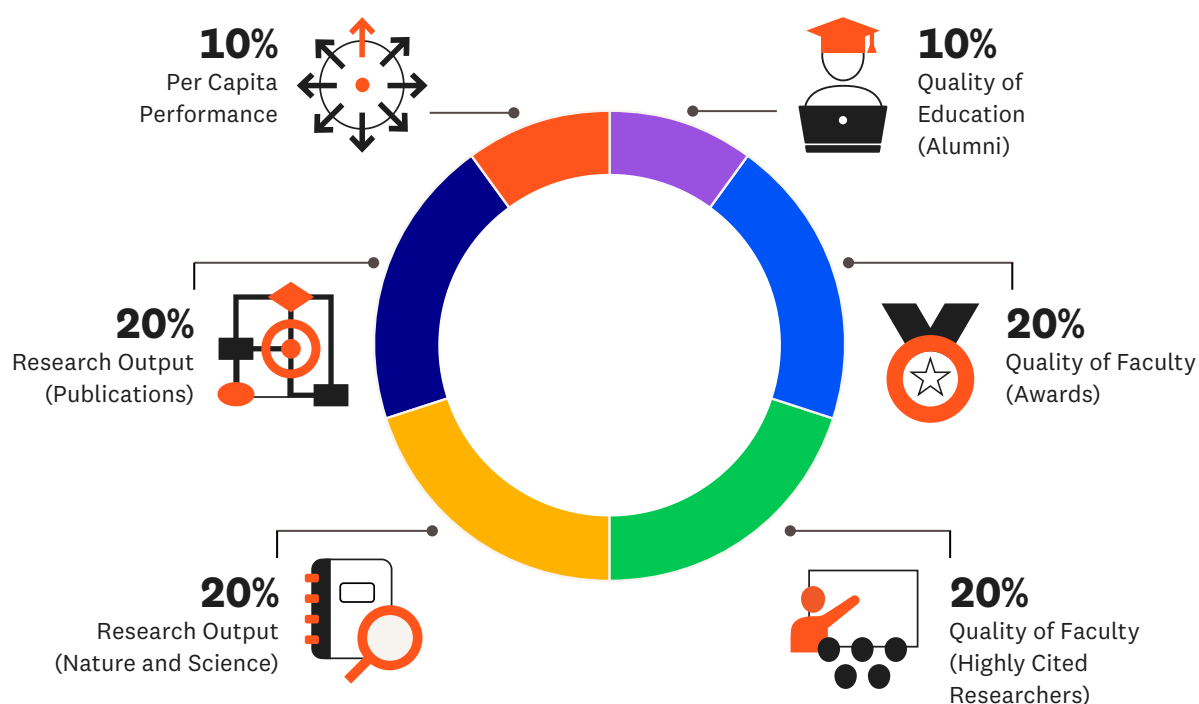
For each indicator, the highest-scoring institution is assigned a score of 100; other institutions receive a percentage score relative to the top performer.

[Visit methodology page](#)

## Indicators and weights (current methodology)

Indicator	Weight	Description
Quality of Education (Alumni)	10%	Alumni of an institution winning Nobel Prizes or Fields Medals
Quality of Faculty (Awards)	20%	Staff of an institution winning Nobel Prizes or Fields Medals
Quality of Faculty (HiCi)	20%	Researchers recognized as Highly Cited Researchers (HiCi) by Clarivate
Research Output (Nature & Science)	20%	Papers published in Nature and Science
Research Output (Publications)	20%	Papers indexed in the Web of Science Core Collection
Per Capita Performance (PCP)	10%	Weighted sum of the five indicators divided by the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) academic staff (a formula is applied when staff data are not available)

*For institutions specialized in the humanities and social sciences, indicators related to publications in Nature and Science are not considered.*



# CWTS Leiden Ranking (Traditional Edition)

**Ranking organization:**

Centre for Science and Technology Studies (CWTS),  
Leiden University.

**Ranking report:**

[CWTS Leiden Ranking \(Traditional Edition\)](#).

**Report focus:**

Global research-intensive universities.

**Purpose statement:**

To serve the research community by offering high-quality information on university performance.

**Scope:**

Over 1,500 major universities worldwide.

**Candidate universities:**

Any university meeting the publication threshold is automatically included (produced at least 800 publications indexed in the Web of Science database over the most recent five-year period).

**Data sources:**

- Bibliometrics: Web of Science database (Clarivate)
- CWTS in-house data and normalization procedures for field, publication year and document type

**Timing:**

Annually (typically April or May).



## Ranking methodology

The Leiden Ranking presents a variety of indicators, enabling the performance of universities to be explored from a diversity of perspectives. It is based entirely on bibliographic data on scientific publications. The ranking does not calculate a single composite score or overall rank. Instead, it presents a set of bibliometric indicators that allow users to explore performance dimensions independently.

[Visit methodology page](#)

## Indicator groups (current methodology)

Type of Indicator	Description	Indicators*
Scientific impact	Measures scholarly output and citation impact relative to global averages	P, P(top 1%, top 5%, top 10%, top 50%), PP(top 1%, top 5%, top 10%, top 50%), TCS, MCS, TNCS and MNCS
Collaboration	Captures international, national and industry co-authorship	P, P(collab), PP(collab), P(int collab), PP (int collab), P(industry), PP(industry), P(<100 km) (<5,000km) and PP (<100 km) (<5,000km)
Open access	Reflects the share of publications available openly across different OA models	P, P(OA), PP(OA), P(gold OA), PP(gold OA), P(hybrid OA), PP(hybrid OA), P(bronze OA), PP (bronze OA), P(greenOA), PP(greenOA), P(OA unknown) and PP (OA unknown)
Gender diversity	Provides insight into the gender distribution of authors	A (number of authorships), A(MF), A(unknown), PA(unknown), A(M), PA(M) and PA(M   MF), A(F), PA(F), PA(F   MF)

*All indicators are based on fractional counting unless full counting is selected. Normalization accounts for field, publication year and document type.*

*\*P = number of publications, PP = Proportion of publications, (x%) = top x %, Collab = co-authored publications with one or more organizations, int. collab = international collaboration, industry = collaborative publications with industry, OA = Open Access, A = number of authorship, M = male, F = female. For full description of each, visit CWTS Information page.*

## About the data and indicators

The Leiden Ranking (Traditional Edition) considers only a subset of publications from the Science Citation Index Expanded, Social Sciences Citation Index and Arts & Humanities Citation Index. These are referred to as core publications – articles written in English, authored (not anonymous), not retracted and published in international journals that meet CWTS criteria for citation analysis. Journals must have an international scope and sufficient citation links to other core journals, which generally excludes trade journals and popular magazines.

*This methodological summary is condensed; readers are encouraged to consult the CWTS Leiden Ranking site for full definitions and data coverage.*

Readers can explore detailed indicator definitions and methodologies <https://traditional.leidenranking.com/information/indicators>

# QS World University Rankings

## Ranking organization:

QS Quacquarelli Symonds.

## Ranking report:

[QS World University Rankings](#).

## Report focus:

Global.

## Purpose statement:

To highlight leading universities worldwide based on global reputation, research performance and international engagement.

## Scope:

Evaluates over 5,600 universities and ranks more than 1,500 institutions.

## Candidate universities:

Universities offering undergraduate and postgraduate programs with measurable research output are considered for inclusion.

## Data sources:

- Academic and employer reputation surveys (collected by QS)
- Bibliometrics: Scopus data and metrics extracted from SciVal (Elsevier)
- Institutional data provided directly to QS

## Timing:

Annually (typically June). Exact publication dates are listed on the [QS Rankings Performance Calendar](#).

## Ranking methodology

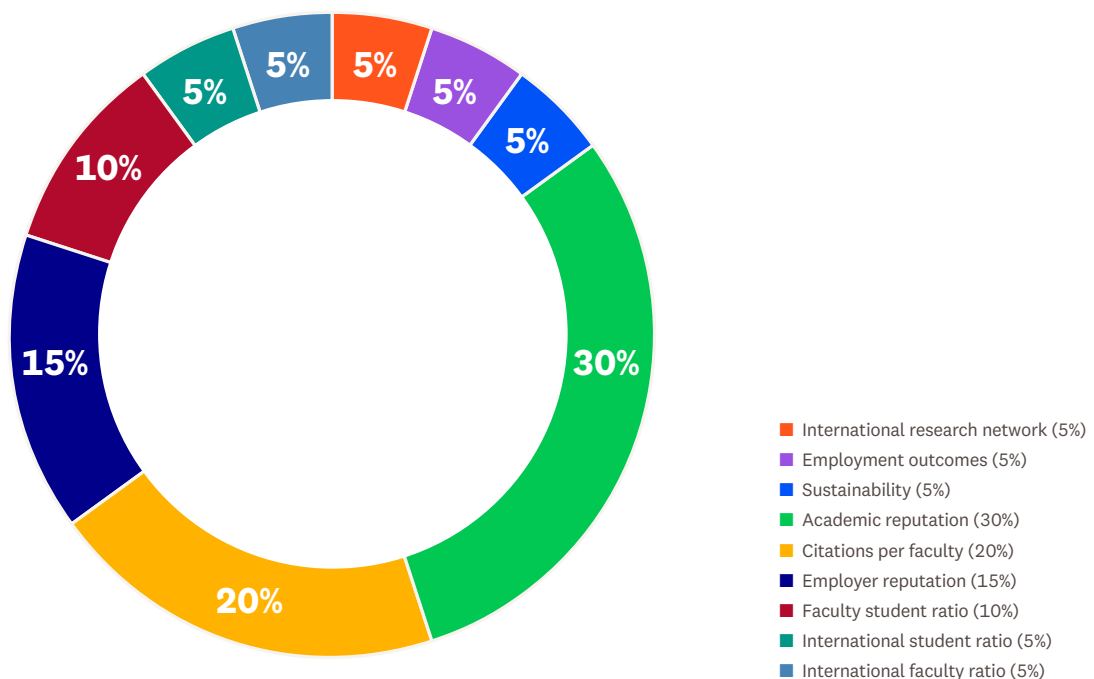
QS combines reputation-based and quantitative indicators to measure academic strength, employability, research impact and internationalization. Each institution receives a weighted score across nine indicators, with results normalized to the top-performing university in each category. The overall score determines position in the global ranking.

[Visit methodology page](#)

## Indicators and weights (current methodology)

Indicator	Weight	Description
Academic Reputation	30%	Global academic survey measuring perceptions of academic excellence
Employer Reputation	15%	Employer survey assessing global graduate employability
Faculty/Student Ratio	10%	Proxy for teaching capacity based on staff-to-student ratio
Citations per Faculty	20%	Research impact measured through Scopus data and metrics extracted from SciVal
International Faculty Ratio	5%	Proportion of faculty who are international
International Student Ratio	5%	Proportion of international students
Employment Outcomes	5%	Effectiveness of institutions in preparing graduates for employment
International Research Network	5%	Breadth and strength of international research partnerships
Sustainability	5%	Institutional performance on environmental and social impact metrics

QS applies adapted methodologies for subject, regional and sustainability rankings. The QS World University Rankings by Subject is covered in a separate section of this guide.



# Times Higher Education World University Rankings

**Ranking organization:**

Times Higher Education (THE).

**Ranking report:**

[THE World University Rankings](#).

**Report focus:**

Global.

**Purpose statement:**

Evaluate research-intensive universities worldwide to measure their performance across all their core missions: teaching, research, knowledge transfer and international outlook.

**Scope:**

Over 1,900 universities from 108 countries and regions.

**Candidate universities:**

Institutions must teach undergraduates, publish at least 1,000 papers over five years and provide verified institutional data to THE.

**Data sources:**

- Institutional data submitted to THE (academic staff, finances, student ratios)
- Bibliometrics: Scopus data and metrics extracted from SciVal (Elsevier)
- Academic reputation survey (THE)

**Timing:**

Annually (typically September-October).



## Ranking methodology

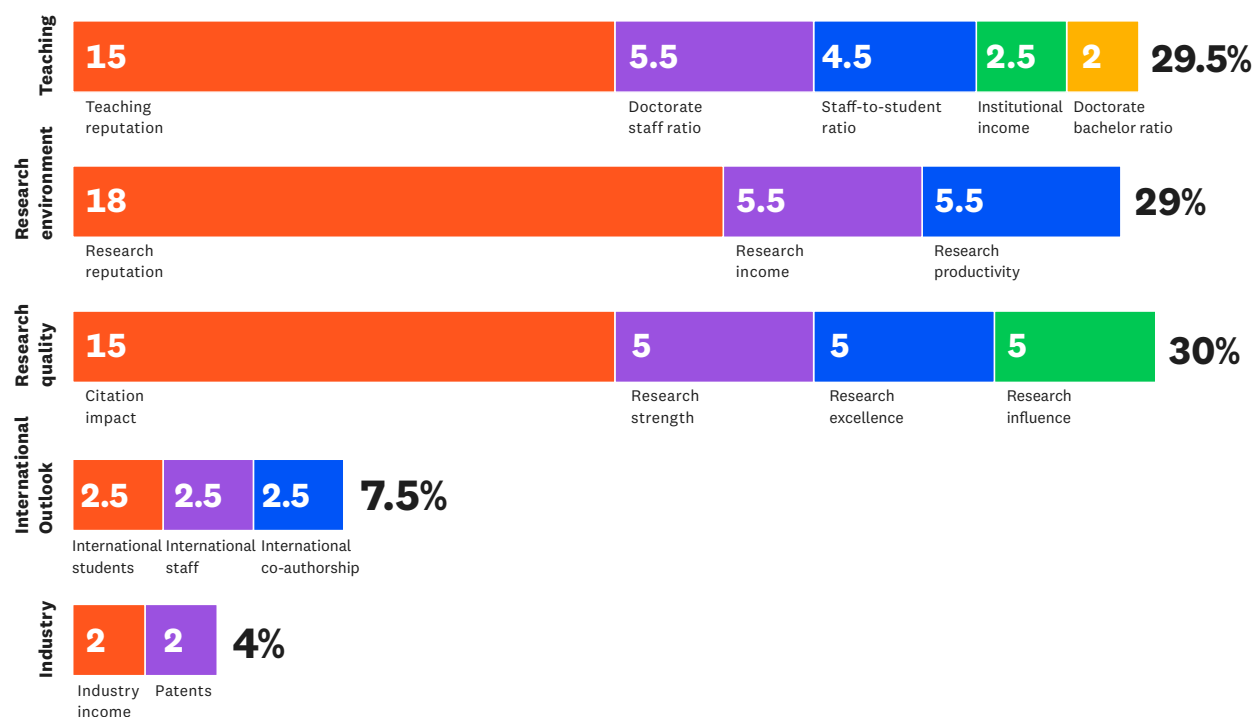
THE uses 18 calibrated performance indicators grouped into five pillars. Each pillar's weight is based on relevance to institutional missions. Results are scaled relative to the top-scoring university in each indicator.

[Visit methodology page](#)

### Indicator pillars and weights (current methodology)

Pillar	Total Weight	% Weighting per metric
Teaching (Learning Environment)	29.5%	Teaching Reputation (15%) Student Staff Ratio (4.5%) Doctorate Bachelor Ratio (2.0%) Doctorate Staff Ratio (5.5%) Institutional Income (2.5%)
Research Environment (Volume income and reputation)	29%	Research Reputation (18%) Research Income (5.5%) Research Productivity (5.5%)
Research Quality	30%	Citation Impact (15%) Research Strength (5.0%) Research Excellence (5.0%) Research Influence (5.0%)
International Outlook (staff, students and research)	7.5%	International Staff (2.50%) International Students (2.50%) International Co-authorship (2.50%) Studying Abroad* (0.0% for 2026)
Industry (Income and Patents)	4%	Industry income (2.0%) Patents (2.0%)

\*Studying abroad is a new metric that will be added to the 2027 ranking report.



# U.S. News & World Report – Best Global Universities Rankings

**Ranking organization:**

U.S. News & World Report.

**Ranking report:**

[Best Global Universities Rankings](#).

**Report focus:**

Global.

**Purpose statement:**

Provide insight into how universities compare globally for students looking to enroll in universities outside of their home countries.

**Scope:**

2,250 universities across 105 countries.

**Candidate universities:**

A pool of 2,346 is created based on two criteria: 1) universities listed in the top 205 from Clarivate's global reputation survey, and 2) universities that have met the minimum threshold of 1,250 papers in five years, as indexed in Clarivate's Web of Science.

**Data sources:**

- Bibliometrics: Web of Science and InCites (Clarivate)
- Global and regional reputation surveys conducted by Clarivate for U.S. News
- Institutional and subject-area data compiled by U.S. News & World Report

**Timing:**

Annually (typically October-November).



## Ranking methodology

U.S. News calculates an overall score from 13 indicators and weights, in addition to the numerical ranks for each indicator on the schools' profile page.

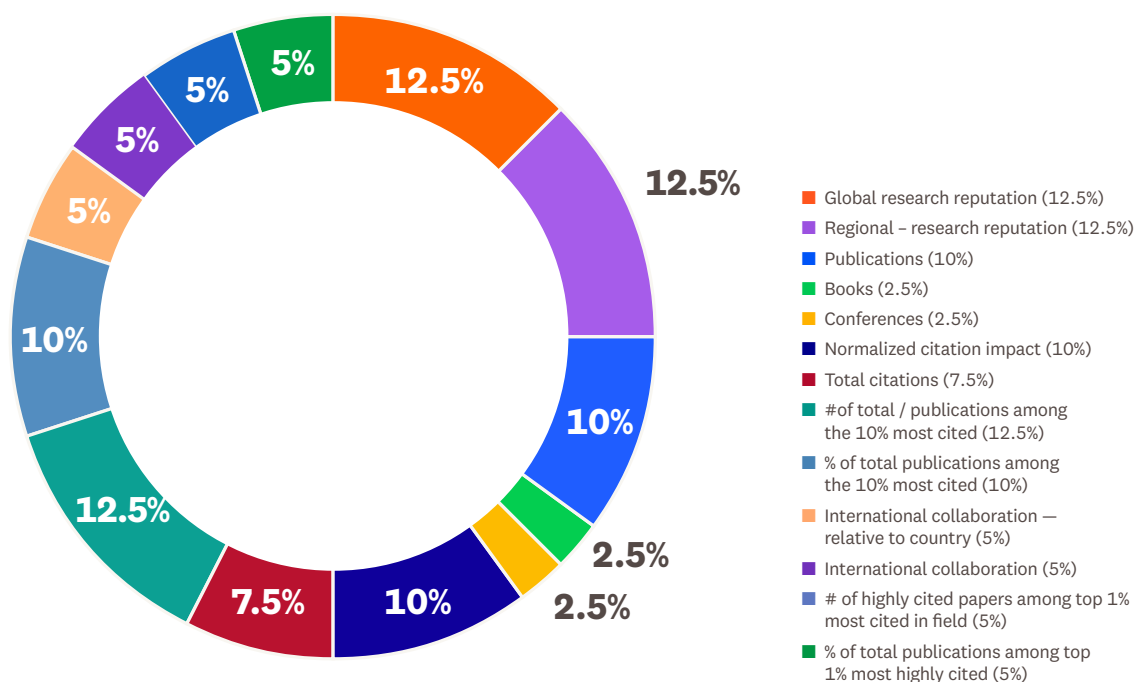
[Visit methodology page](#)

### Indicators and weights (current methodology)

Indicator	Weight
Global research reputation	12.5%
Regional research reputation	12.5%
Publications	10%
Books	2.5%
Conferences	2.5%
Normalized citation impact	10%
Total citations	7.5%
# of publications among the top 10% most cited	12.5%
Percentage of total publications among the top 10% most cited	10%
International collaboration (relative to country)	5%
International collaboration (absolute)	5%
# of highly cited papers (among the top 1% respective of their field)	5%
Percentage of total publications among the top 1% most highly cited papers	5%

#### Note on related U.S. News rankings:

U.S. News & World Report also publishes several national and specialty rankings, including the [Best Colleges Rankings \(United States\)](#), [Best Graduate Schools \(United States\)](#) and [Best Engineering Schools](#). Each of these rankings includes bibliometrics extracted by Elsevier's SciVal (based on Scopus data).



# Times Higher Education Impact Rankings

## Ranking organization:

Times Higher Education (THE).

## Ranking report:

[THE Impact Rankings.](#)

## Report focus:

United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

## Purpose statement:

Identify and celebrate universities that demonstrate progress towards the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through research, stewardship, outreach and teaching.

## Scope:

The current edition includes over 1,700 institutions from 125 countries and regions. Universities are assessed based on their performance across self-selected SDGs and overall institutional commitment to sustainability.

## Candidate universities:

Any institution submitting data for at least four SDGs, including SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), is eligible for inclusion in the overall ranking. Universities can also appear in individual SDG tables based on data submissions for those specific goals.

## Data sources:

- Institutional submissions to THE
- Bibliometrics: Scopus data and metrics extracted from SciVal (Elsevier)
- United Nations SDG framework and indicator definitions

## Timing:

Annually (typically April).



## Ranking methodology

THE's ranking methodology is based on each individual SDG, meaning that every SDG has its own unique requirements. A participating university selects the SDG(s) it wishes to be assessed on and submits the relevant data and evidence.

THE combines the information a university provides with data from other sources, then evaluates how a university has performed against each SDG using metrics it has developed for that specific goal SDG.

If a university provides data on SDG 17, Partnerships for the Goals, and at least three other SDGs, it will be included in the overall ranking. Additionally, THE publishes 17 individual rankings tables, one for each SDG.

[Visit methodology page](#)

## Overall Impact Ranking

### Indicators and weights (current methodology)

SDG category	Weight	Description
SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals	22%	Collaboration and partnership efforts that support the SDGs globally
Three best-performing SDGs (combined)	78%	Weighted contribution from the university's strongest three SDG areas (26% each)

## Individual SDGs

Each SDG ranking is based on bespoke indicators and metrics, relevant to the goal's theme. There are three categories of metrics:

1. Research metrics (derived from data supplied by Elsevier)
2. Continuous metrics (contributions to impact that vary continually across a range)
3. Provided evidence on policies and initiatives



# QS World University Rankings by Subject

## Ranking organization:

QS Quacquarelli Symonds.

## Ranking report:

[QS World University Rankings by Subject](#).

## Report focus:

Subject and discipline-specific global rankings (55 subjects).

## Purpose statement:

To highlight the world's top universities in specific academic disciplines, helping students and institutions identify areas of global academic strength and research performance.

## Scope:

Over 1,500 institutions across 55 broad and narrow subject areas grouped into five overarching faculty areas:

- Arts and Humanities
- Engineering and Technology
- Life Sciences and Medicine
- Natural Sciences
- Social Sciences and Management

## Candidate universities:

Universities are included if they have substantial publication activity and reputation survey responses within a subject area. To qualify for a ranking in a given subject, an institution must meet the minimum publication threshold and reputation response count defined by QS for that discipline.

## Data sources:

- Academic and employer reputation surveys (collected by QS)
- Bibliometrics: Scopus data and metrics extracted from SciVal (Elsevier)
- Institutional data submitted directly to QS

## Timing:

Annually (typically March–April). Exact publication dates and the full QS rankings release calendar are available at: <https://www.qs.com/rankings-performance#rankings-calendar>



## Ranking methodology

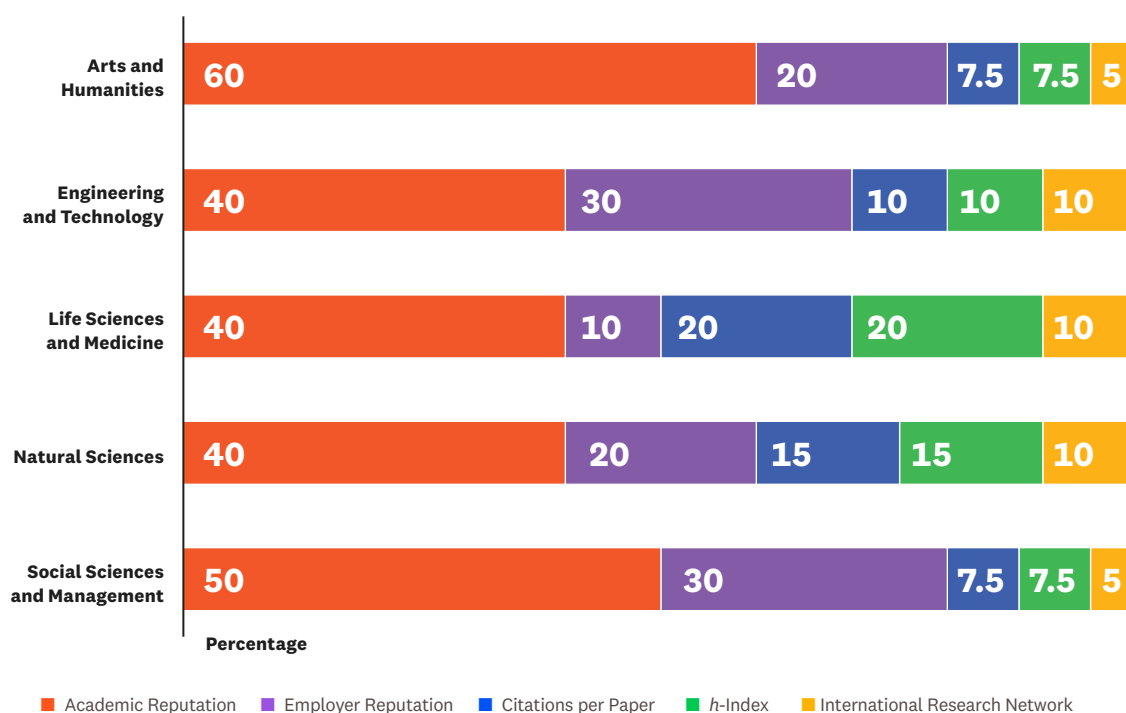
Each subject ranking is based on up to five indicators listed below. Weightings differ by discipline to better reflect research intensity, reputation and industry relevance in each field.

[Visit methodology page](#)

### Indicators and typical weights (current methodology)

Indicator	Weight range	Description
Academic Reputation	40-60%	Subject-level reputation among academics worldwide based on their Academic Survey
Employer Reputation	10-30%	Employer perception of graduates within the discipline based on their Employer Survey
Citations per Paper	5-20%	Research impact and quality of scientific work
<i>h</i> -index	5-20%	Productivity and impact of scholarly output
International Research Network (where applicable)	5%	International collaboration patterns and sustained partnerships within the discipline

The weighting of each indicator varies for each of the five broad subject areas and is displayed in the chart below. Each discipline also has its own weighting distribution, which you can find listed under 'subjects and faculty areas of the QS support page [here](#).



# Closing & further resources

## A broader view of universities and rankings

Rankings offer valuable insights, but they should be used thoughtfully and in context. As institutions navigate the evolving landscape of global rankings, it's important to stay informed about methodologies and best practices. For guidance on responsible interpretation, consider exploring the [IREG Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence page](#).

For deeper insights, data sources and practical tools, visit [Elsevier's University Rankings hub](#) – a central resource for rankings guides, methodology summaries and strategic content.

## Further reading and resources

### Elsevier resources

- Elsevier's University Rankings and Research Activities Topic Hub:  
[elsevier.com/academic-and-government/university-rankings-and-research-activities](https://elsevier.com/academic-and-government/university-rankings-and-research-activities)
- University Rankings: a closer look for academic leaders:  
[elsevier.com/academic-and-government/university-rankings-guide](https://elsevier.com/academic-and-government/university-rankings-guide)
- Subject Rankings Guide:  
[elsevier.com/academic-and-government/subject-rankings-guide](https://elsevier.com/academic-and-government/subject-rankings-guide)
- Demystify University Rankings:  
[elsevier.com/academic-and-government/demystify-university-rankings](https://elsevier.com/academic-and-government/demystify-university-rankings)
- THE World University Rankings Data:  
[Understanding the THE World University Rankings through Scopus & Scival](#)
- THE Impact Rankings Data:  
[elsevier.com/academic-and-government/impact-rankings-data](https://elsevier.com/academic-and-government/impact-rankings-data)
- QS University Rankings Data:  
[elsevier.com/academic-and-government/qs-university-rankings-data](https://elsevier.com/academic-and-government/qs-university-rankings-data)

### Official ranking organization methodology pages referenced

- Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU):  
[shanghairanking.com/methodology/arwu/2025](https://shanghairanking.com/methodology/arwu/2025)
- CWTS Leiden Ranking (Traditional Edition):  
[traditional.leidenranking.com/information/general](https://traditional.leidenranking.com/information/general)
- QS World University Rankings:  
[support.qs.com/hc/en-gb/articles/4405955370898-QS-World-University-Rankings](https://support.qs.com/hc/en-gb/articles/4405955370898-QS-World-University-Rankings)
- QS World University Rankings by Subject:  
[support.qs.com/hc/en-gb/articles/4410488025106-QS-World-University-Rankings-by-Subject](https://support.qs.com/hc/en-gb/articles/4410488025106-QS-World-University-Rankings-by-Subject)
- Times Higher Education World University Rankings:  
[timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/methodology](https://timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/methodology)
- Times Higher Education Impact Rankings:  
[timeshighereducation.com/impactrankings](https://timeshighereducation.com/impactrankings)
- U.S. News & World Report – Best Global Universities:  
[usnews.com/education/best-global-universities/articles/methodology](https://usnews.com/education/best-global-universities/articles/methodology)

### University Rankings – dates to know



[elsevier.shorthandstories.com/university-rankings-dates-to-know/](https://elsevier.shorthandstories.com/university-rankings-dates-to-know/)

Tracking the release dates of key global academic rankings is easy, but keeping up with the intricate, year-round processes that produce each ranking can be challenging. To help, see our Dates-to-know chart. Categorized by ranking, it highlights important dates to assist you in planning and incorporating significant milestones into your strategy.





For more information visit [elsevier.com/solutions/institutional-reputation-and-rankings](https://elsevier.com/solutions/institutional-reputation-and-rankings)



Copyright © 2025 Elsevier B.V.