University rankings guide: A closer look for research leaders

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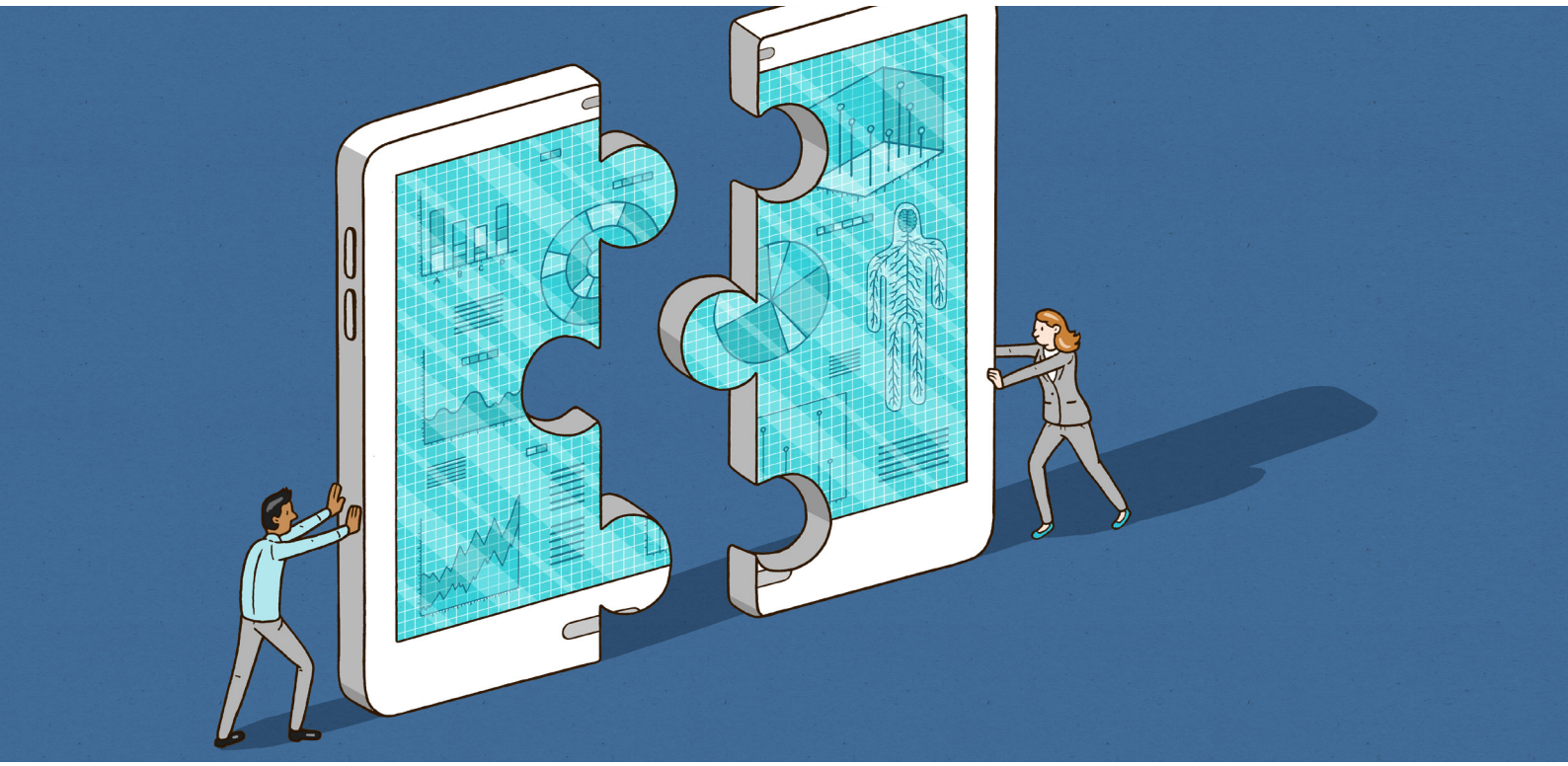
Web version: https://www.elsevier.com/research-intelligence/university-rankings-guide



What are University Rankings?

University rankings are diverse, imperfect — and influential.

Your university has a unique mission. You and your colleagues work hard to attract the right students, talent, and funding to ensure you can achieve it. You know you are doing a great job. But how do you communicate that to the students, researchers, faculty members (and, in some countries, policymakers and funding agencies) considering your university? They want to understand not only how you are performing but how your performance compares to your peers. Enter the world of university rankings.

Rankings are not perfect, but useful

University rankings and league tables are easily accessible and provide a simple way to compare higher education institutions based on similar criteria. But there is always room for improvement, and rankings are often the object of criticism, especially when conflated with reputation.

Due to their limitations, you should not use rankings and league tables as a stand-alone measurement. They are best when used as decision-making tools in conjunction with other indicators and data. We explore this topic further in the chapter: *Are university rankings flawed?*

Rankings are many, and not one size fits all

As the IREG Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence notes on their website, ranking organizations should:

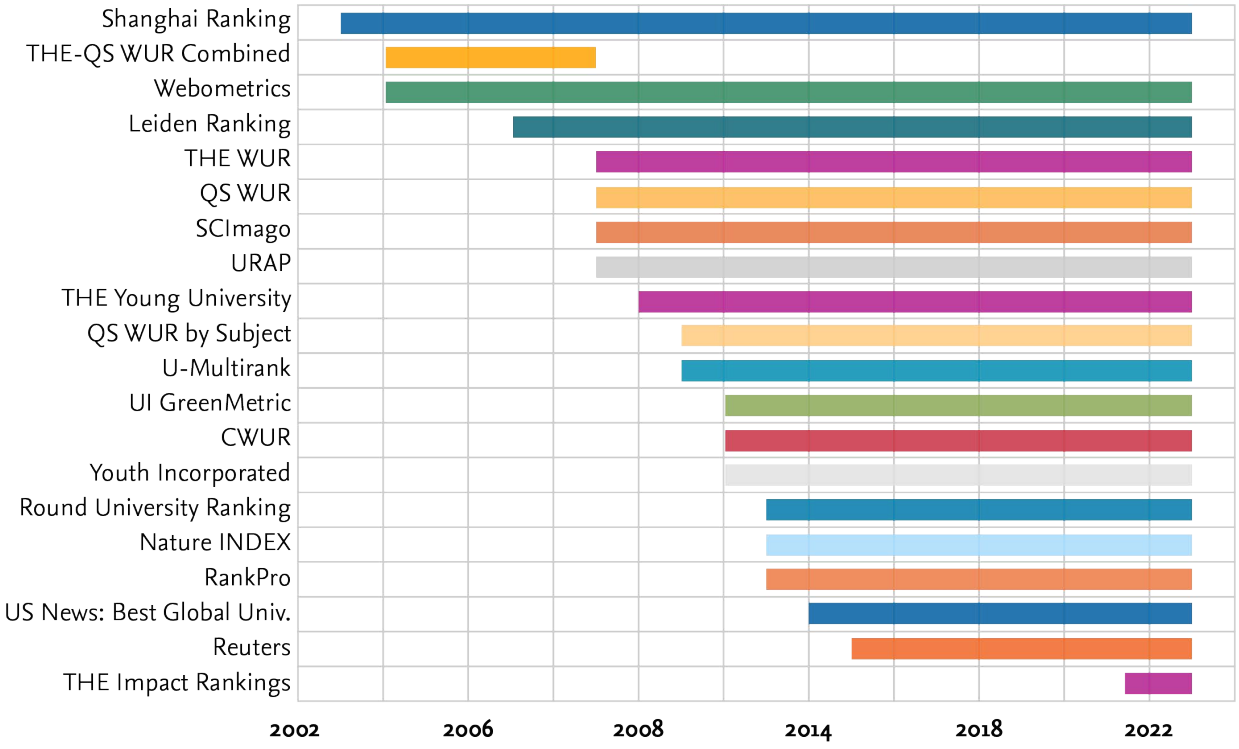
> "Recognize the diversity of institutions and take the different missions and goals of institutions into account. Quality measures for research-oriented institutions, for example, are quite different from those that are appropriate for institutions that provide broad access to underserved communities."

Understand Scopus and SciVal's role in university rankings.

There are now more than 20 university ranking reports or organizations with a global focus, and even more with a regional or discipline-specific rankings. Each university is unique in its mission and purpose; each ranking has its niche, methodology, data sources and indicator. See the chapter "*How are rankings calculated*" for more detail.

The chart below offers a quick glimpse into the growth in international ranking organizations over time. It includes league tables launched to address the different types of universities and their missions.

International ranking organizations and the year they were established.



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Rankings are influential

Rankings are often the go-to resource for students, parents, researchers, potential faculty members, funders, and other bodies seeking an objective insight into your university's performance and ability.

Why do rankings matter?

Over the past 18 years, international university rankings have grown in visibility and prominence. They can influence:

- How your government measures research excellence for your institution
- Whether an undergraduate or graduate student (and their parents) opt for your university
- Why a company selects you as a partner
- Whether a funding body invests in research at your university

In "Perspectives on rankings from a young university," a recent episode of the Research 2030 podcast, César Wazen, Director of International Affairs, Qatar University, notes his opinion on why rankings matter.

Listen in his own words.

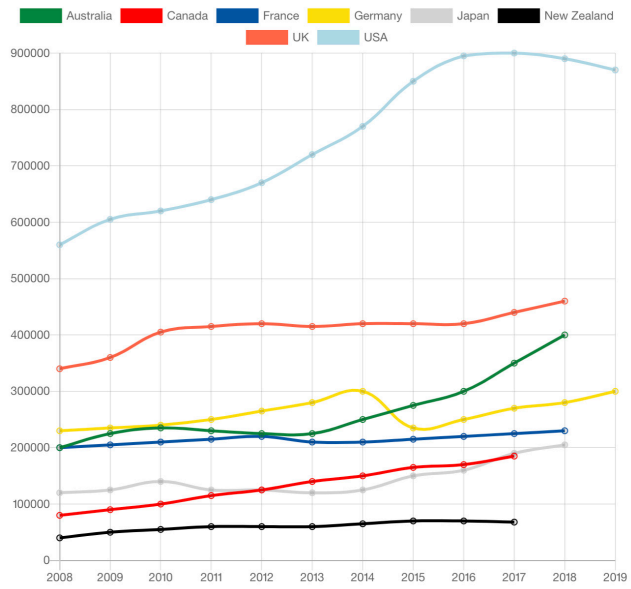
You can hear more of Wazen's insights in the entire episode.

Although rankings are not the sole indicator of your institution's reputation and academic excellence, they provide a quantitative and popular way to benchmark universities nationally, regionally, and globally.

Rankings increase your university's visibility

Since being ranked can increase your university's visibility and profile, it is a tool to promote your visibility. In turn, rankings help your audiences, e.g., students, potential faculty, potential collaborators and more.

Further, being ranked, regardless of your position, can optimize your chances of being selected as a student's higher education provider of choice.



Source: www.universitiesuk.ac.uk

Why rankings can play a role in attracting international students

Until recently, international students were a valuable income source for many higher education institutions. University rankings have long been a popular tool for those students when choosing where to study, especially given that many don't have the time or funds to visit an overseas campus before enrolling. For some years, mainland China has been one of the most significant sources of international students. For example, Chinese students make up the largest share (30%) of non-domestic students in the US.

Although COVID-19 and geopolitical tensions may reduce the number of Chinese students opting to study overseas, the country's dominance of the international student market looks set to continue. According to an article from QS, nearly half (44%) admit that finding a well-ranked university is crucial to them. High-quality teaching is their most important consideration (60%), closely followed by having a good reputation for their chosen subject (54%). These are two measures covered in the major university rankings.

As we can see in this Universities UK graph, by 2018, the US was the most popular destination for international students, with the UK in second place. However, Australia's strong growth before COVID-19 had left it ideally placed to take over that number two spot.

But that looks set to change. Many predict that following a tough 2020 for universities, 2021 will likely prove just as challenging, with concerns over COVID-19 and ongoing travel and visa restrictions negatively impacting international student numbers.

And that will hurt university income. This graph by Multirank, an organization that compares universities, suggests that some countries will be harder hit than others, particularly Australia and the UK.

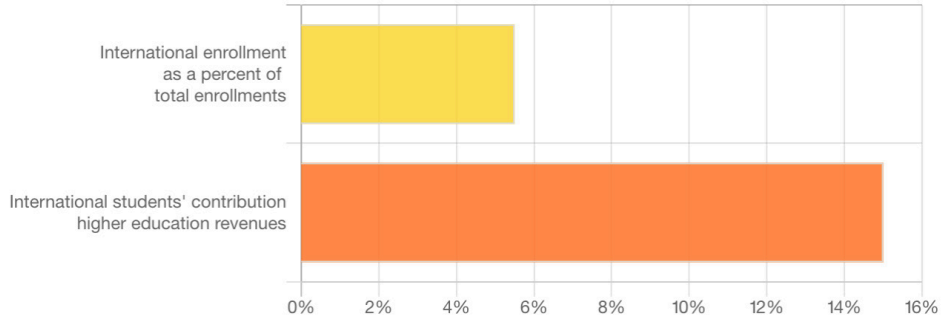
Potential loss of total income (%) resulting from the decline of international fee-paying students due to COVID-19. Source: Multirank

Falling international student numbers also have financial implications for your country or region. For example, in 2019, the Association of International Educators (NAFSA) reported that

"...international students studying at US colleges and universities contributed $41 billion and supported 458,290 jobs to the US economy during the 2018-2019 academic year."

In 2020, NAFSA reported that during the 2019-2020 academic year, the financial contribution of $41 billion had dropped by 4.4% - a loss of $1.8 billion. The number of supported jobs fell by 9.2%.

Competition for both domestic and international students is rising. Rankings, and your university's position within them, are likely to play an increasingly important role.



Source: BPC Calculations from the International Institute of Education and The National Center for Education Statistics, US Department of Education

Who publishes University Rankings?

Rankings are developed and published by various organizations, including magazines, newspapers, websites, academics, and governments. Some ranking organizations specialize in world rankings, others in national or regional, and a few do both. This page concentrates on ranking organizations with a global remit and research output focus.

A brief history of global rankings

According to Hazelkorn's article, "Global science, national research, and the question of university rankings," in 2003, Shanghai Jiao Tong launched the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), also known as the Shanghai Ranking. With the economy becoming increasingly global and higher education more international, it was clear that a framework was needed to map, compare, and understand university performance.

From 2003 on, multiple ranking organizations and reports have entered the arena, expanding options into how you can compare Higher Education Institutions with greater variety in niche reports.

Two examples of this are:

- The QS World Rankings' University Rankings by Subject launched in 2011: It considers varying research cultures and publication rates across academic disciplines.
- Times Higher Education's (THE) THE Impact Rankings introduced in 2019: It is "a new global university ranking that aims to measure institutions' success in delivering the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals."

From The Economist:

"The rankings race is thus marked by a happy irony. Driven in part by nationalistic urges, it has fostered the growth of a community that knows no borders. Critics are right that governments and universities obsess too much about rankings. Yet the world benefits from the growth of this productive, international body of scholars."

Source accessed July 28, 2020: https://www.economist.com

What are some of the key global ranking organizations, and how do they differ?

Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), Times Higher Education (THE) and Shanghai Ranking (the Academic Ranking of World Universities; ARWU) are considered among the most established and prominent global ranking bodies.

Seven key global ranking reports to know are (in alphabetical order):

- CWTS Leiden Rankings
- Shanghai Rankings (ARWU)
- Times Higher Education World University Rankings
- Times Higher Education Impact Rankings
- QS World University Rankings
- QS World University Rankings by Subject
- US News & World Report: Best University Rankings

CWTS Leiden Rankings

Focus: Research-intensive universities
Scope: 1,000 institutions
Timing: Annually (June)

Stated goal: The Leiden Ranking stands for a multidimensional perspective on university performance.

Data sources: Web of Science data from the Science Citation Index Expanded, the Social Sciences Citation Index, and the Arts & Humanities Citation Index, which is then enriched by CWTS. Excludes conference proceeding publications and book publications

Methodology: The Leiden Ranking provides information exclusively about the research done at universities. They offer important insights into the scientific performance of nearly 1000 major universities worldwide. Research is represented in publications, and the collected data about these publications forms the basis for the Leiden Ranking. A set of bibliometric indicators are used to provide statistics on scientific impact, collaboration, open access publishing, and gender diversity.

Identification of universities: Typically, a university is characterized by a combination of education and research tasks in conjunction with a doctorate-granting authority. However, these characteristics do not mean that universities are particularly homogeneous entities that allow for international comparison on every aspect. As a result of its focus on scientific research, the Leiden Ranking presents a list of institutions that have a high degree of research intensity in common.

These indicators include:

- Publications
- Open access indiators
- Size-dependent vs. size-independent indicators
- Gender indicators
- Scientific impact indicators
- Counting method
- Collaboration indicators
- Trend analysis
- Stability intervals

World University Rankings

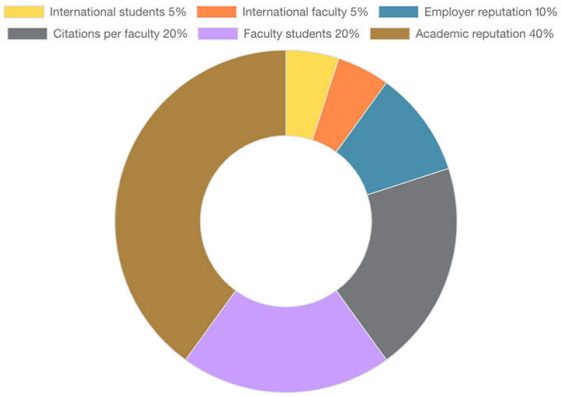
Focus: Global
Scope: 1,500+ institutions
Timing: Annually (Spring)

Stated goal: For students seeking to understand how their prospective university choices are perceived by the global academic community, and by potential employers across the world.

Data sources: Elsevier's Scopus database

Methodology: QS uses a consistent methodological framework, compiled from six simple metrics to capture university performance. Faculty area normalization was introduced in 2015 to ensure that institutions specializing in Life Sciences and Natural Sciences were not unduly advantaged, QS has avoided fundamental changes, with the aim to provide a consistent year-on-year comparison.

QS World University Rankings evaluates universities according to six metrics:



WUR by Subject

Focus: Individual subject areas (48)
Scope: 1,000 institutions
Timing: Annually (Spring)

Stated goal: Help prospective students identify the world's leading schools in their chosen field in response to high demand for subject-level comparisons.

Data sources:

- International Reputation
- QS global survey of academics
- QS global survey of employers
- Research impact: Elsevier's Scopus database
- Research citations per paper
- h-index in relevant subject

Methodology: Four components are combined to produce the results for each of the subject rankings, with weightings adapted for each discipline:

- Academic reputation
- Employer reputation
- Research citations per paper
- h-index

As research cultures and publication rates vary significantly across academic disciplines, the QS World University Rankings by Subject applies a different weighting of the four indicators in each subject.

For example, in medicine, where publication rates are very high, research citations and the h-index account for 25% of each university's total score. On the other hand, in areas with much lower publication rates such as history, these research-related indicators only account for 15% of the total ranking score. Meanwhile, in subjects such as art and design, where there are too few papers published to be statistically significant, the ranking is based solely on the employer and academic surveys.

Shanghai Rankings

Focus: Global
Scope: 1800+ institutions are ranked annually, top 1000 are published
Timing: Annually (August)

Stated goal: Provide a starting point for identifying national strengths and weaknesses as well as facilitating reform and setting new initiatives

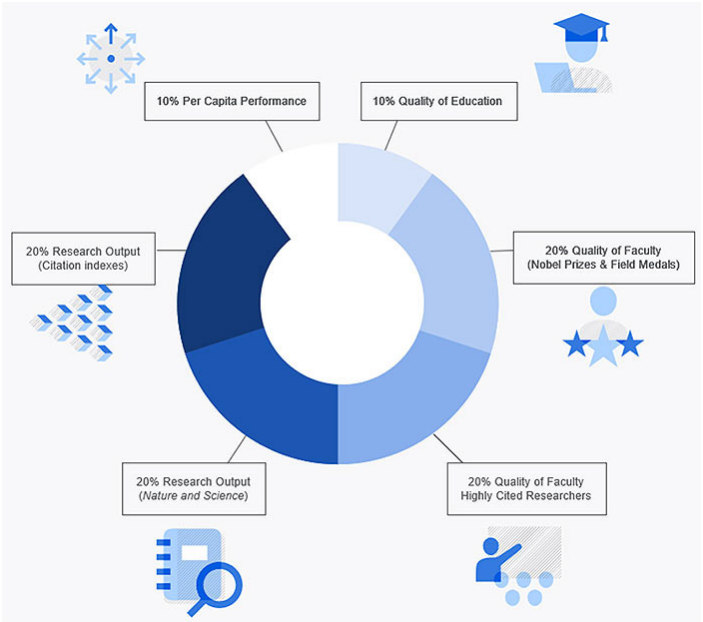
Data sources:

- Nobel Prize
- Fields Medals (www.mathunion.org)
- HiCi: Clarivate
- N&S: Web of Science
- Bibliometrics: Web of Science
- Number of academic staff: National agencies such as National Ministry of Education, National Bureau of Statistics, National Association of Universities and Colleges, National Rector's Conference.

Methodology: The highest scoring institution is assigned a score of 100, and other institutions are calculated as a percentage of the top score. An institution's rank reflects the number of institutions that sit above it.

- 10% Quality of Education: Alumni of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals
- 20% Quality of Faculty: Staff of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals
- 20% Quality of Faculty: Highly Cited Researchers
- 20% Research Output: Papers published in Nature and Science*
- 20% Research Output: Papers indexed in Science Citation Index-Expanded and Social Science Citation Index
- 10% Per Capita Performance: Per capita academic performance of an institution

* For institutions specialized in humanities and social sciences such as London School of Economics, N&S is not considered, and the weight of N&S is relocated to other indicators.



World University Rankings

Focus: Global
Scope: 1,400+ institutions
Timing: Annually (September)

Stated goal:

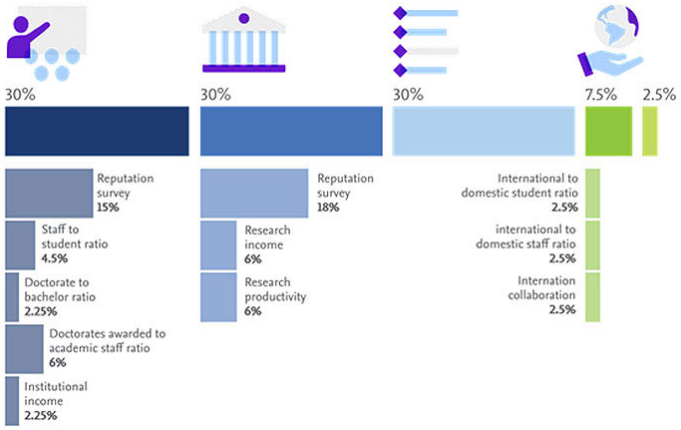
Evaluate research-intensive universities across all their core missions: teaching, research, knowledge transfer and international outlook.

Provide trusted performance data on universities for students and their families, university academics, university leaders, governments and industry

Data sources: Academic Reputation Survey | Elsevier's Scopus database

Methodology: THE uses 13 performance indicators to position more than 1,400+ institutions worldwide. These performance indicators are grouped into five areas (as shown to the right).

- 30% Teaching (the learning environment):
- 15.0% Reputation survey
- 4.50% Staff-to-student ratio
- 2.25% Doctorate-to-bachelor's ratio
- 6.00% Doctorates-awarded-to-academic-staff ratio
- 2.25% Institutional income
- 30% Research (volume, income and reputation):
- 18% Reputation survey
- 6.0% Research income
- 6.0% Research productivity
- 30% Citations (research influence)
- 7.5% International outlook (staff, students and research)
- 2.5% Proportion of international students
- 2.5% Proportion of international staff
- 2.5% International collaboration
- 2.5% Industry income (knowledge transfer)



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- 2.5% Industry income (knowledge transfer)

Impact Rankings

Focus: United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
Scope: 768 institutions (changes annually)
Timing: April

Stated goal: To provide a showcase for the work being delivered by universities in our communities, and an opportunity to shine a light on institutional activities and efforts not covered in other rankings and demonstrate the differences a university is making to the world we livein.

Data sources:

- Universities can submit data on as many of the 17 SDGs as they are able
- Elsevier's Scopus database

How universities are ranked:

THE uses indicators to provide comparisons across three broad areas: research, outreach, and stewardship, across all of the SDGs. Any university that provides data on SDG 17 and at least three other SDGs is included in the overall ranking. The methodology was developed in conjunction with THE's partners Vertigo Ventures and Elsevier, and after consultation and input from individual universities, academics, and sector groups. Universities can submit data on as many of the SDGs as they are able. Each SDG has a series of metrics that are used to evaluate the performance of the university in that SDG. As well as the overall ranking, THE also publishes the results of each individual SDG. This rewards any university that has participated with a ranking position, even if they are not eligible to be in the overall table.

Methodology:

A university's final score in the overall table is calculated by combining its score in SDG 17 with its top three scores out of the remaining 16 SDGs. SDG 17 accounts for 22% of the overall score, while the other SDGs each carry a weight of 26%. This means that different universities are scored based on a different set of SDGs, depending on their focus.

The score from each SDG is scaled so that the highest score in each SDG in the overall calculation is 100. This is to adjust for minor differences in the scoring range in each SDG and to ensure that universities are treated equitably whichever SDGs they have provided data for. It is these scaled scores that we use to determine which SDGs a university has performed most strongly in; they may not be the SDGs in which the university is ranked highest or has scored highest based on unscaled scores

Best University Rankings

Focus: Global
Scope: 1,500 institutions across more than 80 countries
Timing: Annually (October)

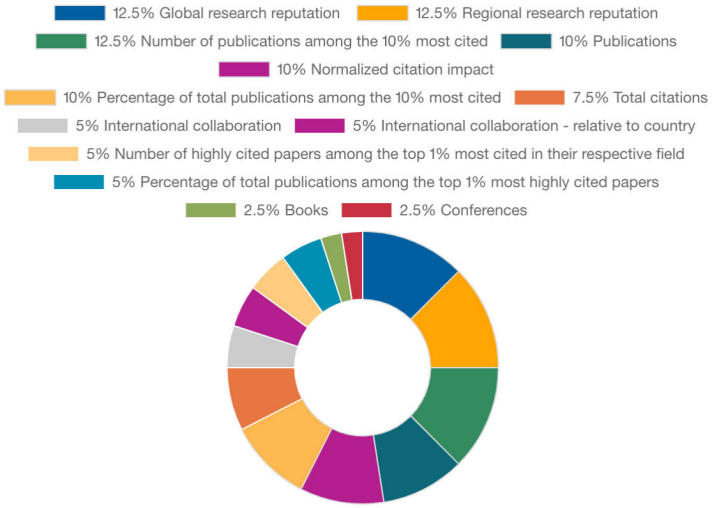
Stated goal:

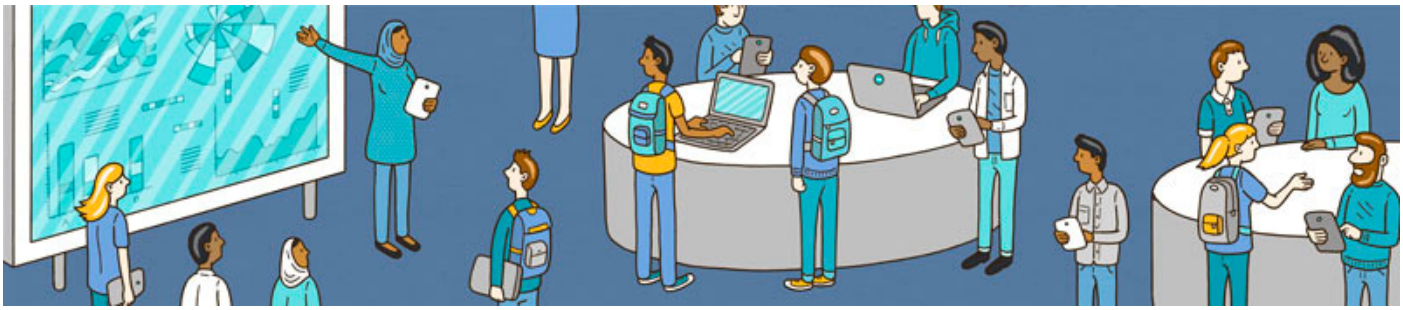
- For potential students: used to explore higher education options beyond their own countries' borders and to compare key aspects of schools' research missions.
- For universities: provide a way to benchmark themselves against other schools, become more visible globally, and find top schools in other countries to collaborate with.

Data sources:

- Bibliometric data and indicators: Web of Science and InCites
- Reputation Indicators: Clarivate Analytics' Academic Reputation Survey

Methodology: The rankings focus specifically on schools' academic research and reputation overall and not on their separate undergraduate or graduate programs. To arrive at a school's rank, the overall global scores are calculated using a combination of the weights and z-scores for each of the 13 indicators used in the rankings.





How are universities ranked?

Before we dive into how the rankings organization calculates their rankings, remember they differ significantly in methodology and evolve year to year. They have their limitations and shouldn't be used in isolation to assess reputation or excellence.

As Lydia Snover, Director of Institutional Research at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, commented in a Times Higher Education (THE) blog post

"Let me be clear: there is no such thing as a perfect university ranking. There is no 'correct' outcome as there is no single model of excellence in higher education, and every ranking is based on the available, comparable data, and is built on the subjective judgement (over indicators and weightings) of its compilers."

Why is it important to understand methodologies

The focus area(s), algorithms and methodologies vary across the growing number of ranking tables and reports produced worldwide. Once you grasp the inner workings, you will understand how your practices and data can impact that ranking's outcome. We look at this in more detail in the chapter: Can I influence university rankings?

Where do ranking organizations get their data and information?

All ranking methodologies rely on data inputs from a range of external resources. These often include the three examples listed below. Still, much depends on the niche and focus of that particular league table. Similarly, the weighting and calculations selected for each element will depend on the report's specific direction.

- Your university's institutional data and researcher data (based on research output) from bibliometric or citation indexing databases, such as Scopus
- Data drawn from university departments such as human resources, student administration, finances
- Reputation surveys conducted with faculty, students, alumni, and employers

Most ranking organizations' websites offer some detail about their methodology to help you understand their focus and the data and information used to inform their results.

Where can I find information on the calculations and weighting used?

Please see the lists above or download the quick guide.

Are university rankings flawed?

According to critics, the answer is yes! They claim that current systems:

- Are based upon flawed data assumptions
- Negatively impact student school selection
- Exclude data important to students
- Fail to consider the mission of the university
- Stifle individuality and creativity

Why are the university rankings calculations so problematic?

Ellen Hazelkorn, a global rankings researcher, states in the article, University Rankings: there is room for error and 'malpractice'", believes university rankings are popular because they are simple. However, "*...this is also the main source of criticism.*" No single ranking can capture the full depth and breadth of a university's contributions.

For Hazelkorn, issues include:

- **Their lack of objectivity:** Ranking organizations determine the indicators and weightings that are most important.
- **Their priorities:** Most rankings consider attributes for which (internationally) comparable data are available, typically research and reputation. There is little or no focus on other vital areas, such as student and societal engagement or even teaching and learning.

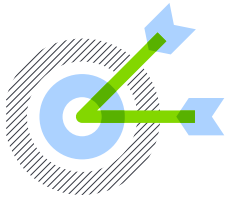
Many feel that rankings rely too much on "proxies," for example some use factors like the number of Nobel-prize-winning alumni or the value of endowments when determining education quality. Others claim algorithm bias, with some institutions always at the top, including those publishing in English. Others point to the fact that the placement of a university can vary wildly per ranking organization.

Here is Josh Wyner, Founder and Executive Director of the College Excellence Program at the Aspen Institute, discussing rankings that focus on student outcomes.

"They don't typically give colleges rewards for equity: for keeping their doors as open as possible. Nor do they look at how much students grow while they are at college. If... you don't look at where they enter or how likely they are to achieve those outcomes – given how well-prepared they were and how wealthy they were when they entered college – you may be distorting the picture."

Rankings: what do they mean for universities on a mission?

For mission and value-led organizations, university rankings can be particularly problematic since the principles they use to judge themselves are not in the various calculations. These include open science, equality, diversity and other society-focused agendas.



On the Malcolm Gladwell podcast, Revisionist History, in the episode "Project Dillard," he speaks with Walter M. Kimbrough, President of s, a US Historically Black College and University (HBCU). Kimbrough describes his college as one that wants to educate as many people as the can. Yet, the fact that their mission includes teaching an economically disadvantaged lowers their rank.

Many ranking organizations actively work with universities and third-party entities to learn, evolve, and adapt their models. As technology, transparency and understanding improve, so will university rankings.

What is the future for university rankings?

Most agree that rankings are here to stay. But will they evolve to address some of the concerns raised in the chapter: *Are university rankings flawed*? In the future, we expect to see

- Shifts in methodology in response to Covid-19
- A rise in more focused rankings
- A move beyond traditional measures
- Increasing use of third-party data and AI technologies

The pandemic and global rankings – what will Covid-19 change?

Potentially, quite a lot. Ranking organizations are still considering their response to the pandemic. Some plan to take a fresh look at their methodology to acknowledge the virus' impact on teaching and learning, collaboration, and international students. Some wonder how to account for the rapid rise in some universities' publications linked to Covid-related research.

As Elizabeth Gadd of INORMS said in the March 2021 article "Measure what matters: Ranking universities in the age of pandemic,"

What we are finding with all sorts of research evaluation issues is that the pandemic is not going to impact in the next 12 months. It's going to be impacting over the next ten years.

Some believe the popularity of global rankings may dip as prospective students, faced with potential travel restrictions and a tighter budget, turn to national and regional rankings instead.

Do we need so many university rankings?

The world is changing, and so are universities. Existing rankings organizations have responded with new tables that rank universities by subject area, geographic location, societal contribution, or degree types.

We've also seen new organizations dip a toe into the rankings market. The Three University Missions Moscow International University Ranking claims to be the first to evaluate education, research and interaction with society.

But more indicators and rankings equals more data collection for universities, and countries with fewer resources will suffer, according to rankings expert Richard Holmes in "*Universities in places like Africa will not allocate resources to report data.*"

To solve this problem, QS believes we could see rankers increase their use of **third-party data**. **They may even turn to external organizations** "*to produce objective and accurate data for analysis.*" Using this kind of data could help address the claim that current methodologies often lack transparency. Additionally, by adopting artificial intelligence technologies, for example, natural language processing (NLP), the burden on data collection could decrease.

Is it time to expand the rankings' indicators?

The previous section, Are university rankings flawed? makes clear that many believe that rankers should stop focusing on reputation or traditional research metrics and start including other kinds of measures. For example:

- Article usage
- Media and social media mentions,
- Citations in policy or clinical documents

We also expect to see a greater focus on societal contributions. Currently, Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings assesses universities against the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Perhaps the key is to step away from the concept of "ranking" altogether. In the Research 2030 podcast episode "Societal Impact, SDG Research & Universities: A conversation with Professor Aluísio Segurado of University of São Paulo," Segurado, Head of Research at the Brazilian university, suggests taking a more multidimensional approach. He believes this will not only support comparative analysis but help universities identify collaborators.

Listen in his own words.

Can I influence university rankings?

With correct focus, effort, and tools, you can make sure your ranking accurately reflects your institution. According to Cesar Wazen of Qatar University:

"...we included the ranking effort as part of the initiatives and objectives and KPIs of our strategy. We have formed a committee at the institutional level that is called, you know obviously ranking committee and we have a presentation, and it offers some experts in statistics and the fields and research from the college. So basically, a good group of people that are approaching rankings from different perspectives and trying to align the efforts and the excellence the university you know is engaging in and performing in research, and also in teaching with the indicators of the rankings. And I think this is starting to do us good on all levels."

While you may not be able to change your rank directly, there are some steps you can take to make sure your ranking reflects your university.

- Determine which ranking best fits your needs
- Stay informed of the methodology
- Monitor your institution's progress on strategic initiatives

Since there are many factors that influence rank position, including other universities being added, a change to your position may be the result of these parameters.

Determine which rankings reflect you

There are numerous university rankings in the world. As mentioned in the section, "Who publishes university rankings," each ranking has its focus and mission. Some examples are:

- THE Young Universities lists the best universities younger than 50 years.
- THE Impact Rankings assesses universities against the UN SDGs
- QS Global MBA Rankings provides a comprehensive list of the best places to study for an MBA
- QS World University Rankings by Subject covers a total of 51 disciplines

Three of the most popular global rankings are:

- THE World University Rankings
- QS World University Rankings
- ARWU also known as Shanghai

While their missions are similar, they differ in their methodologies. For example, in 2020, THE ranked the

University of Oxford in the first position, while QS ranked Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and ARWU ranked Harvard University in the top position.

Stay informed of the methodology

Once you have determined which ranking you are focusing on, stay up to date on their methodology and the changes that they make year to year. Some data comes from your university, so this can help you prepare ahead of any deadlines.

Staying informed of the methodology includes understanding the underlying data that the rankers depend on. For example, THE's methodology includes:

- Data you provide
- Reputation survey data
- Bibliometric data from Scopus

Evaluating all the data sources available to you for accuracy can help ensure an accurate rank.

You can also use tools such as SciVal to benchmark your research against your peers.

Read more about how Scopus contributes to university rankings and how SciVal helps monitor and evaluate those rankings.

Monitor your institution's progress on strategic initiatives

Perhaps the best way of looking at rankings is best summarized by Cesar Wazen from Qatar University when he speaks about rankings and strategy on the Research 2030 podcast. In the podcast Wazen mentions that initially they didn't care that much about rankings with thoughts such as, "*Our mission is to educate and to train Qatari nationals.*" Eventually he changed his mind:

> We realized that tracking is not only a game to play…but also contains some very interesting indicators that can provide the university with answers on whether where it was doing well and bad and benchmarking it with regional and worldwide competitors.

In reflection, perhaps the question is not "*Can I influence the rankings*" but "*Can I gain valuable insights from the information behind the rankings to strengthen my university overall?*"

The bottom line: Will I rise in the rankings?

In summary, many factors contribute to your rank, with varying levers impacting where your university ultimately lands. You may invest time in checking the accuracy of your data, re-evaluating your strategy, or benchmarking your regional and worldwide peers yet not see substantial growth. Achieving a rise in the rankings is not a straightforward path, and there are no guarantees. But, the time you put into understanding and participating in university rankings can lead to a more accurate reflection and deeper understanding of your university overall. To do this, we encourage a two-pronged approach.

- Make sure the source of bibliometric data for your institution's research is an accurate reflection. In the case of QS and THE, this data comes from Scopus.
- Gather deeper insights into the levers driving your university rankings and those of other universities using analytic tools such as SciVal