

Influence of global university rankings on strategic decisions at Ho Chi Minh City university of education in balancing global competitiveness and local educational goals

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Abstract University rankings serve as crucial tools for evaluating and comparing the quality of higher education institutions worldwide. This study examines the impact of global university rankings on the strategic choices made by higher education institutions, with a focus on developing countries such as Vietnam. This study investigates rankings, including QS, Times Higher Education (THE), and Webometrics, and analyzes their emphasis on research output, internationalization, and reputation, frequently at the expense of teaching quality and community engagement. The reviewed literature comprises peer-reviewed articles and studies published from 2010--2023, emphasizing Vietnamese universities such as Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, which encounter difficulties in reconciling global competitiveness with local educational objectives. The findings demonstrate that global rankings tend to favor universities with robust research infrastructures and extensive international networks, resulting in disparities between well-funded institutions and those with limited resources. While emerging trends such as contributions to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are becoming more prominent, research metrics continue to be the primary determinants. The study concludes that existing ranking systems fail to adequately represent the broader objectives of universities in developing countries, especially those emphasizing local impact.

Keywords: university rankings, developing countries, teaching quality, social impact

1. Introduction

University rankings have emerged as a significant instrument for assessing and comparing the character of higher education institutions on a global scale. These rankings are a source of reference for a variety of stakeholders, such as students, faculty, governments, and employers, and they are used to inform decisions regarding university funding, collaboration, and student enrollment (Hazelkorn, 2015; Kayyali, 2023; Sarrico & Godonoga, 2021). In the last two decades, rankings such as QS World University Rankings, Times Higher Education (THE) Rankings, and Webometrics have gained significant prominence, establishing them as crucial indicators of institutional performance (Chen & Chan, 2021). Although these rankings provide a method for assessing and benchmarking universities on a global scale, they also present obstacles, particularly in terms of conforming their criteria to the diverse missions of institutions, particularly those in developing countries (Dill & Soo, 2005; Serafini et al., 2022).

Rankings are employed by higher education institutions worldwide to establish themselves in competitive international academic environments. Rankings enhance the reputation of universities by attracting top talent, including students, academics, and research funding, and providing visibility and prestige (Marginson, 2007; Salmi, 2021; Soysal et al., 2024). Many universities have adopted this as a strategic objective, prioritizing their performance in global rankings. Nevertheless, classification systems are not without criticism in terms of their methodologies. Numerous rankings prioritize research output, citation counts, and international reputation, frequently disregarding other critical components of a university's mission, including teaching quality, community engagement, and contributions to societal development (Galleli et al., 2022; Hauptman Komotar, 2019).

The dependence on global rankings can be both a constraint and an opportunity for universities in developing countries, such as Vietnam. Rankings can provide opportunities for institutional funding, global visibility, and increased international collaboration. However, numerous universities in these regions may lack the resources to compete with established institutions in Europe or North America, which could result in a potential disparity between the ranking criteria and the institution's local or national priorities (Hazelkorn, 2009; Jöns & Hoyler, 2013; Marginson, 2006). The primary mission of Ho Chi Minh City



University of Education (HCMUE) is to provide quality education, foster pedagogical excellence, and address local educational needs. Therefore, the pursuit of international recognition through rankings must be balanced with this principle.

The relevance of university rankings in Vietnam is on the rise as the country further integrates into the global education market. The Vietnamese government has established ambitious objectives for higher education, such as promoting the participation of universities in international evaluations to improve their global reputation (Harman et al., 2010; Hoang et al., 2018). Nevertheless, this procedure presents unique obstacles for numerous Vietnamese universities, including HCMUE. These encompass challenges in adhering to the publication standards established by ranking agencies that prioritize English-language journals, inadequate international collaborations, and inadequate financial resources for research infrastructure (Truong & Cuong, 2019; Vuong & Tran, 2019). Additionally, there are ongoing discussions regarding the extent to which global ranking systems accurately represent the distinctive contributions of universities in emerging economies, particularly in the areas of social impact, teaching quality, and community service (Hazelkorn, 2015).

The primary goal of this literature review is to evaluate the impact of university rankings on the strategic objectives of HCMUE, with a particular emphasis on their function and significance. This review analyzes the historical evolution of university rankings, discusses the current trends and challenges they present, and investigates the key theoretical frameworks that underpin them. In doing so, the objective of this study is to offer a more comprehensive comprehension of the methods by which HCMUE can navigate the global ranking landscape while still adhering to its mission of educational and social development.

2. Theoretical Framework

University rankings are founded on a variety of fundamental theories regarding competition, reputation, and performance measurement in higher education. These frameworks assist in elucidating the reasons why institutions prioritize rankings and the implications of these rankings for their strategies, objectives, and global academic positioning.

Hazelkorn (2011) claimed that the theory of global competition is a foundational theory in this domain. It argues that rankings are a means for universities to demonstrate their global competitiveness. Hazelkorn stated that universities are no longer merely national institutions in a world that are becoming more interconnected; rather, they are a component of a global knowledge economy. Rankings function as a criterion in this context, enabling universities to assess their performance in comparison to their international counterparts (Adam, 2020; Marginson, 2007). Institutions that succeed in these evaluations are perceived as having superior quality, which can have a beneficial impact on their capacity to attract international students, faculty, and research funding (Dill & Soo, 2005; Mazzarol, 1998). This theory is inextricably linked to the concept of global reputation management, in which universities employ rankings as a signaling mechanism to increase their visibility and prestige on a global scale (Wedlin, 2011). The competitive race for talent and resources is significantly influenced by the perception of excellence, which is further bolstered by strong ranking positions.

The RBV of institutions, as articulated by Barney (1991), is another pertinent theory. The performance of a university in rankings is a reflection of its internal resources and capabilities, as per RBV. These resources encompass infrastructure, international collaboration, research output, and faculty expertise. Universities that possess and effectively employ these resources are more likely to achieve success in global rankings. For example, indexes such as QS and Times Higher Education (THE), which prioritize these criteria, tend to favor institutions with a greater number of research publications and international partnerships. Universities can further improve their competitive advantage by achieving high rankings, which in turn attract additional resources in a positive feedback loop (Lee et al., 2020; Mahdi et al., 2019). Nevertheless, this perspective also underscores the disparities between universities with substantial financial or academic assets and those with fewer. According to Hazelkorn (2011), the resources of universities vary, resulting in unequal competition and an environment in which fewer or less-funded institutions are unable to maintain their ranking performance in comparison to well-established institutions.

Furthermore, the institutional theory of isomorphism is instrumental in comprehending university rankings. Isomorphism is the process by which organizations, and institutions in particular, become more similar over time as a result of external pressures, such as ranking metrics (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Hersberger-Langloh et al., 2021; Wedlin, 2007). Rankings impose a form of coercive pressure on institutions to adhere to specific standards, such as increased research output or internationalization efforts, to increase their ranking position. Consequently, universities may adjust their strategies to more closely align with the criteria established by ranking agencies, potentially at the expense of their local missions or other distinctive aspects of their identity (King, 2009; Mophew & Swanson, 2011). For example, institutions may prioritize international student recruitment or English-language publications to increase their ranking scores, although these areas are not fundamental to their original mission.

Legitimacy theory is another critical theory that posits that universities seek validation and legitimacy from external stakeholders, such as governments, donors, and potential students (Circa et al., 2021; Deephouse & Carter, 2005; Parker, 2011). Rankings serve as a means for universities to establish credibility by illustrating their compliance with international standards of excellence. An institution's reputation can be improved by strong performance in rankings, which indicates to stakeholders that it meets or exceeds international quality standards. However, this pursuit of legitimacy can occasionally result in mission

drift, in which universities prioritize activities that enhance their ranking position over those that are consistent with their primary mission, such as community engagement or teaching quality (Hazelkorn, 2015).

Additionally, signaling theory provides a perspective on the manner in which universities employ rankings as a means of communicating their status and value to external audiences. Universities with high rankings convey a positive signal to prospective students, faculty, and partners, indicating that they are high-quality institutions (Al Hassani & Wilkins, 2022; Dicker et al., 2019). This signal can create a self-reinforcing cycle in which highly ranked universities attract more talented students and faculty, resulting in improved outcomes and higher rankings. Nevertheless, this theory also elucidates why universities that do not perform well in rankings may face difficulty in gaining entry into the elite group. Although they provide a higher quality of education or research, they are perceived as inferior institutions (Lynch & O'riordan, 1998).

Finally, the marketization of higher education is a theoretical framework that is expanding and is associated with university rankings. Universities have become increasingly competitive in their pursuit of students and resources, notably on a global scale, as a result of the transition to viewing education as a market commodity (Connell, 2013; Soysal & Baltaru, 2021). In this marketized environment, rankings are essential, as they provide an ostensibly objective measure of the quality of universities. Institutions that are highly ranked are perceived as providing a superior "product", which in turn stimulates demand from students and other stakeholders (Abina et al., 2020). This theory asserts that higher education is becoming more commercialized, with evaluations serving both as a marketing tool and a benchmark for institutional performance.

University rankings are not merely a reflection of performance; they also affect the strategic behaviors and decisions of higher education institutions. A comprehensive framework for comprehending the significance of rankings and the ways in which they influence the actions and priorities of universities is provided by theories such as global competition, the resource-based view, institutional isomorphism, signaling theory, and the marketization of higher education (Tayar, 2015). These theories emphasize the complexity of the ranking system and the diverse effects it has on institutions, particularly those in developing countries, which may encounter difficulty in reconciling local educational objectives with the requirements of global competitiveness.

3. Methods

3.1. Search strategy

The literature reviewed for this study was selected through a thorough search of numerous academic databases, such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ScienceDirect. These databases were selected because of their extensive access to peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and conference papers. The primary search terms were as follows: "university rankings", "higher education rankings", "impact of rankings on universities", "QS World University Rankings", "Times Higher Education (THE) Rankings", "Webometrics", "developing countries", "Vietnamese higher education", "HCMUE" and "ĐHSP TP.HCM". To encompass a wide range of literature regarding the role of rankings in higher education, with a particular emphasis on their influence in developing countries and on Ho Chi Minh City University of Education (HCMUE), these terms were chosen.

To guarantee relevance, the search was restricted to articles published between 2010 and 2023, as this time frame encompasses the most recent advancements in global ranking systems and their increasing impact on university policies and strategies. Foundational texts, including those of Hazelkorn (2011), which offer critical theoretical insights into global competition in higher education, were granted exceptions.

3.2. Process of selection

The literature review was selected on the basis of thorough inclusion and exclusion criteria. Articles were incorporated if they were peer reviewed, published in reputable academic journals, or authored by credible researchers in the field of higher education. Furthermore, articles were required to explicitly address the impact of university rankings on institutional strategies or in the context of developing countries or Vietnamese universities. The methodologies of prominent ranking systems, including QS, Times Higher Education (THE), and Webometrics, were the focus of specific literature.

Articles were excluded if they were deemed outmoded or irrelevant to the current state of global university rankings or if they focused on unrelated topics, such as primary or secondary education. Conference papers and non-peer-reviewed materials were also excluded unless they offered distinctive perspectives on the specific obstacles encountered by developing countries in higher education rankings.

A total of 40 documents were chosen for in-depth review after these criteria were applied. This selection guaranteed a harmonious balance between empirical studies on the impact of university rankings, theoretical discussions on the subject, and case studies that concentrated on Vietnam and other developing regions.

3.3. Categorization

Categorization refers to the process of classifying or grouping items on the basis of shared characteristics or criteria. It is a fundamental cognitive process that aids in organizing information and facilitating understanding.

The literature review was categorized into three primary sections: (1) Historical evolution of university rankings, (2) theoretical perspectives on rankings and their impact, and (3) practical implications for developing countries and Vietnamese universities. The categories facilitated a systematic examination of the literature, emphasizing the evolution of ranking systems and their strategic implications for institutions.

Historical Evolution of University Rankings: This section encompasses research that examines the origins and progression of prominent ranking systems such as QS, THE, and Webometrics. This study examines adaptations in the methodologies of these systems in response to the evolving global higher education landscape.

This category examines the theoretical frameworks present in the literature, including *Hazelkorn's theory of global competition and the resource-based view (RBV)* (Barney, 1991; Hazelkorn, 2011). This section examines the reasons behind the significant influence of rankings on university strategies.

Implications for Development in Emerging Economies and Vietnamese Higher Education Institutions: This section examines the particular challenges encountered by universities in Vietnam and other developing nations in enhancing their rankings. This study examines Vietnamese universities, specifically HCMUE, and analyzes the impact of global ranking pressure on their decision-making and internationalization strategies.

The literature was categorized to facilitate a comprehensive analysis that incorporates global perspectives on university rankings alongside the specific context of HCMUE.

4. Review of the Literature

4.1. Historical perspective

University ranking systems have significantly evolved since their inception. Initial rankings, demonstrated by the Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) established in 2003, emphasized research output, specifically metrics such as publication numbers, citation rates, and faculty honors such as Nobel Prizes (Aithal & Kumar, 2020; Alaşehir, 2010; Irungu et al., 2020). These metrics predominantly favor English-speaking countries, particularly in the fields of science and technology, owing to the prevalence of high-impact journals published in English. This prompted criticism that the rankings failed to reflect the complete diversity of institutional strengths, especially in fields such as the social sciences and humanities (Welsh, 2019). The ARWU ranking prioritizes scientific output, thereby excluding universities that excel in teaching or community engagement (Dmitrishin, 2013).

In response to these critiques, more equitable ranking systems emerged, including the QS World University Rankings established in 2004 and the Times Higher Education (THE) Rankings introduced in 2010. The rankings incorporated supplementary criteria such as academic reputation, employer reputation, and teaching quality, with the objective of achieving a more thorough assessment of universities (Liu & Cheng, 2005). Despite these advancements, research outputs and internationalization metrics, including the ratio of international students and staff, continue to be pivotal to these rankings. Webometrics, established in 2004, introduced an alternative methodology by emphasizing the digital presence and visibility of universities, utilizing data from institutional websites as the foundation for their rankings (Khamala et al., 2018; Thelwall et al., 2005). This approach highlights the significance of universities' online presence in a progressively digital landscape.

4.2. Current trends in university rankings

Recent trends in university rankings indicate an increasing focus on internationalization and sustainability, highlighting changes in the priorities of higher education. The Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings evaluate universities according to their contributions to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), emphasizing aspects such as quality education, gender equality, and climate action (Perović & Kosor, 2020; Serafini et al., 2022). This change in ranking metrics underscores the growing significance of universities' social impact, extending beyond conventional indicators such as academic performance and research output (Adler & Harzing, 2009). This comprehensive evaluation framework prompts institutions to prioritize both academic excellence and their contributions to advancing global sustainability objectives (Hazelkorn, 2015; Yarime et al., 2012).

The QS World University Rankings have integrated additional criteria that acknowledge the increasing significance of cross-border partnerships in higher education. The emphasis on international research network collaboration highlights the importance of global cooperation in enhancing academic research and institutional prestige (Atta-Owusu et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2019). The rankings prioritize employer reputation, a crucial element in assessing the alignment of university programs with job market demands. Employer reputation indicators assist prospective students in assessing the career prospects and market value of a university's degrees, rendering this a critical criterion for numerous global ranking systems (Marginson, 2007, 2014).

Despite these advancements, numerous ranking systems continue to prioritize research output and citations as fundamental metrics for evaluation. For example, THE Rankings assign as much as 30% of their score to research influence, quantified by citation impact (Kanellos et al., 2019). The persistent emphasis on research excellence prompts concerns regarding the potential neglect of other critical dimensions of higher education, including teaching quality and community engagement. This is especially pertinent for institutions such as Ho Chi Minh City University of Education (HCMUE), where the

main focus may prioritize teaching and local educational requirements over research output (Harman et al., 2010; Nguyen, 2014).

4.3. Analysis of the major ranking systems

University ranking systems serve as valuable tools for assessing institutional performance; however, each system possesses inherent limitations and has been subject to criticism regarding particular methodological aspects. The QS World University Rankings have faced criticism due to their dependence on subjective measures, including academic reputation surveys (Marginson, 2014). These surveys gather responses from scholars globally, asking them to evaluate institutions according to their perceived reputation. Goddard and Puukka (2008) noted that these surveys often favor well-established institutions with extensive global networks, which can disadvantage smaller or newer universities lacking comparable visibility. Consequently, newer universities or those located in developing countries may find it challenging to attain high rankings, despite their actual performance and contributions to education and research (Anowar et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the QS methodology places significant emphasis on employer reputation, which, although critical, may be subject to similar biases (Huang, 2012). Institutions with established relationships with multinational corporations or those situated in economically robust countries may obtain higher evaluations from employers, thereby distorting the rankings in favor of these institutions. The dependence on subjective measures has led to critiques that QS rankings may not consistently reflect an accurate or comprehensive assessment of a university's quality (Adler & Harzing, 2009; Dill & Soo, 2005).

The Times Higher Education (THE) Rankings are criticized for their excessive focus on research metrics, especially their significant dependence on citation impact and research output. Although these metrics serve as significant indicators of academic influence, they often obscure other essential functions of a university, including teaching quality and community service. Strand et al. (2003) argues that an emphasis on research may result in a limited perspective on university performance, disadvantaging institutions that prioritize teaching or community engagement. Universities such as Ho Chi Minh City University of Education (HCMUE), which prioritizes pedagogical excellence and community development, may receive rankings that do not accurately reflect their true strengths (Hazelkorn, 2009; Kayyali, 2023).

Webometrics adopts an alternative methodology by evaluating universities according to their digital presence and online visibility (Khamala et al., 2018). This approach, despite its innovation, has limitations in accurately evaluating academic excellence. Webometrics primarily emphasizes quantitative metrics, such as the number of webpages and the visibility of universities on search engines, rather than assessing the quality of publications or the impact of research. Critics argue that Webometrics rankings prioritize universities with robust digital infrastructures over those with significant academic accomplishments (Govender & Nel, 2021; Thurairaja & Diki, 2023). Universities that significantly invest in their online platforms may achieve higher rankings, regardless of whether their research output and academic quality align with their digital presence.

Despite these limitations, Webometrics provides a distinct perspective by assessing a university's influence in the digital realm, which is increasingly significant in today's interconnected environment. The increasing importance of online learning and open access research indicates that a university's digital presence is essential for its global influence. Hazelkorn (2015) observes that universities with a strong online presence are more effectively able to connect with a global audience, thereby positioning Webometrics as a valuable instrument for assessing dimensions of university performance that may be neglected by other rankings.

Each ranking system offers valuable insights; however, their methodologies may introduce biases that favor specific types of institutions. Universities, particularly in developing countries, face the challenge of excelling in diverse ranking criteria while remaining aligned with their mission and values (Montesinos et al., 2008).

4.4. Gaps in the literature

Despite comprehensive studies on university rankings, notable gaps remain. There is a paucity of research regarding the alignment of global ranking systems with national education policies and the institutional missions of universities in developing countries. Many global ranking systems are structured for international competition, frequently emphasizing metrics that may not adequately reflect the local priorities of universities in developing countries. Universities such as HCMUE, which focus on teaching excellence and community engagement, may struggle to achieve high rankings that prioritize research output and internationalization (Hazelkorn, 2009).

Moreover, existing rankings frequently neglect nonresearch contributions, including policy consultation, community engagement, and various forms of public service (Moore & Ward, 2010). These contributions are essential for universities, especially in developing countries, where institutions significantly influence societal development. The literature indicates the need for contextualized ranking systems that more accurately reflect the distinct missions and contributions of universities across various regions.

The identified gaps underscore the necessity for future research to concentrate on the creation of more inclusive ranking systems that acknowledge the varied roles of universities, especially in emerging economies. Addressing these gaps will enable

future research to create more equitable and meaningful metrics for university performance that correspond with global standards and local priorities.

5. Synthesis and Discussion

5.1. Integration of findings

The literature on university rankings offers important insights into their substantial impact on institutional strategies, especially in developing countries such as Vietnam. The findings indicate that rankings significantly influence universities' international visibility and global competitiveness. Rankings such as QS, Times Higher Education (THE), and Webometrics are essential tools for assessing university performance, influencing important decisions regarding student recruitment, faculty appointments, and research funding (Hazelkorn, 2015; Taylor et al., 2014). These systems depend significantly on metrics, including research output, internationalization, and reputation, frequently favoring universities with superior financial and academic resources (Reddy et al., 2016). This advantage enables well-established institutions to enhance their global status, placing smaller, resource-limited universities at a comparative disadvantage.

The literature consistently highlights the growing importance of internationalization in university rankings, which has emerged as a critical element in the competitiveness of global higher education. Systems such as the THE Impact Rankings illustrate this trend by evaluating universities' contributions to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), emphasizing the significance of both academic performance and social impact (Beynaghi et al., 2016). This expands university evaluations to encompass global contributions to critical issues such as climate action, gender equality, and quality education, thus prompting institutions to align their strategies with global development goals. The integration of cross-border partnerships and international research collaborations has become increasingly important, as rankings acknowledge the role of global academic networks in enhancing knowledge exchange and research impact (Gui et al., 2019; Hazelkorn & Gibson, 2017).

Nonetheless, the literature indicates a prevalent critique that numerous ranking systems, notably QS and THE, often place excessive emphasis on research metrics, particularly citation impact. The excessive focus on research outcomes frequently results in the oversight of other essential aspects of a university's mission, including teaching quality, community engagement, and contributions to society (Strand et al., 2003). Universities such as Ho Chi Minh City University of Education (HCMUE), which emphasize teaching quality and local educational requirements, may face challenges in achieving high rankings because the evaluation criteria predominantly favor research-intensive institutions (Hazelkorn, 2009; Kayyali, 2023). Consequently, there is increasing apprehension that existing ranking methodologies fail to offer a thorough assessment of university performance, especially for institutions in developing countries, whose objectives encompass not only research but also substantial contributions to regional development and community service.

The emphasis on research intensifies the disparity between universities in developed and developing countries, as those with strong research infrastructure and global partnerships are more likely to occupy the highest positions. Universities that excel in pedagogy and community-focused initiatives often struggle to achieve recognition in global rankings, despite their essential contributions to local educational advancements and social change. The literature emphasizes the necessity for balanced ranking systems that incorporate various dimensions of university contributions, such as educational quality, social impact, and community engagement, alongside research performance (Marginson, 2007).

5.2. Connections

The analyzed studies collectively emphasize the role of research metrics in influencing university rankings across different systems, notably in QS and Times Higher Education (THE) rankings. Both systems highlight the significance of research output and international reputation, resulting in similar pressures on universities to dedicate considerable resources to publication and global recognition. This has created a competitive landscape in which universities are driven to improve their research output and visibility to attain higher rankings (Adler & Harzing, 2009; Marginson & Van der Wende, 2007). The focus on citation impact and global ranking influences institutional strategies and funding decisions, as universities with higher rankings tend to attract greater investment in research and international collaboration. Consequently, universities in developing countries are compelled to prioritize research metrics, frequently to the detriment of other essential functions such as teaching and community engagement.

Webometrics emphasizes digital visibility, reflecting a broader trend that encourages universities to improve their global presence in an increasingly digitized environment (Khamala et al., 2018). Webometrics assesses universities by measuring their online impact and digital presence, thereby promoting the development of strong online infrastructures and outreach initiatives among institutions (Rafique et al., 2024). This indicates a common goal among ranking systems to establish universities as global entities that are accessible and influential beyond national boundaries.

The studies focus on the increasing importance of internationalization in university rankings, as demonstrated by the incorporation of indicators such as international students, staff, and research collaborations. These measures are integral to QS and THE methodologies, illustrating the growing global character of higher education. Universities are incentivized to

enhance their international presence via student exchange programs, joint research initiatives, and cross-border collaborations to increase their ranking positions (Deb, 2020). The Impact Rankings have implemented a more comprehensive framework by incorporating universities' contributions to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), thereby broadening the evaluation criteria beyond academic performance and research output (De la Poza et al., 2021). This includes recognizing the social responsibilities of universities and prompting institutions to address global challenges, including climate change, gender equality, and sustainable education. The increasing focus on social impact in rankings such as THE Impact presents a comprehensive perspective on university performance, enabling institutions in developing countries, which may demonstrate strength in local and regional engagement, to enhance their global standing.

Despite these innovations, the prevalence of research metrics continues to be a consistent feature across all ranking systems, leading to ongoing discussions regarding the sufficiency of these criteria in representing a university's broader mission. Institutions primarily dedicated to teaching or emphasizing community service may be at a disadvantage in rankings that prioritize research output as the main indicator of academic success (Hazelkorn, 2009). This results in a disconnection for institutions such as Ho Chi Minh City University of Education (HCMUE), which focuses on educational quality and regional development. Universities must balance the pursuit of global recognition with their local responsibilities and educational objectives as they navigate ranking systems.

5.3. Contradictions

While there is general agreement on the significance of research and internationalization, discrepancies exist in the weighting of these factors across various ranking systems. For example, QS and THE emphasize research output, whereas Webometrics focuses on online visibility, which does not directly reflect the quality or impact of research (Khamala et al., 2018). This prompts an examination of the equity of ranking universities predominantly on the basis of metrics that may inadequately represent their comprehensive contributions, especially in teaching and community service.

A further contradiction exists in the evaluation of teaching quality among various rankings. Although THE asserts the integration of teaching excellence within its framework, research suggests that this component is frequently eclipsed by the emphasis placed on research metrics (Eynon & Iuzzini, 2020). Consequently, universities that emphasize teaching or community involvement may struggle to achieve favorable rankings, resulting in discrepancies in how these rankings represent the varied missions of higher education institutions.

5.4. Implications

These findings have significant implications for universities, especially in developing countries such as Vietnam. The persistent focus on research output and internationalization in rankings exerts pressure on universities to dedicate substantial resources to these domains, frequently compromising their fundamental missions in teaching and community engagement. Universities such as Ho Chi Minh City University of Education (HCMUE) face a strategic dilemma in balancing the pursuit of higher rankings with their commitment to pedagogical excellence and local educational needs.

The increasing dependence on rankings to assess university quality may intensify disparities between well-resourced institutions and those with limited resources. Smaller universities or those located in developing regions may find it challenging to compete in global rankings, as these systems typically favor institutions with well-established international networks and substantial research output. This can result in mission drift, wherein universities prioritize ranking metrics over their core objectives, including teaching quality and local impact (Hazelkorn, 2015).

University rankings serve as important benchmarks; however, they pose challenges for institutions that do not conform to the conventional model of research-intensive, globally oriented universities. Universities in developing countries require ranking systems that are contextualized to reflect their distinct missions and contributions to local and national development.

6. Research Directions and Recommendations

6.1. Future research

The literature identifies multiple gaps that present opportunities for future research, especially concerning the alignment of global university rankings with the missions of universities in developing countries. Future research should concentrate on creating contextualized ranking systems that more effectively consider local priorities and institutional missions in countries such as Vietnam. Research could examine the potential for rankings to integrate metrics that prioritize teaching quality, community engagement, and policy contributions, which are frequently neglected by current ranking systems.

A potential area for future research is the examination of the long-term effects of rankings on university strategies. Research may investigate the extent to which the pressure to excel in global rankings contributes to mission drift, wherein universities divert their attention from local obligations to pursue broader global objectives. This is particularly pertinent for institutions such as Ho Chi Minh City University of Education (HCMUE), which may encounter difficulties in balancing their primary emphasis on pedagogical excellence with the necessity of enhancing their research output and international visibility.

Furthermore, research may explore the equity implications of global rankings, specifically examining how smaller or less resourced institutions can compete in a landscape dominated by universities with extensive international networks and substantial research funding. The development of strategies to equalize opportunities for resource-limited universities may mitigate the biases inherent in existing ranking systems.

6.2. Recommendations

Enhancing university ranking methodologies requires the development of more balanced metrics that accurately represent the varied missions of higher education institutions. For example, QS and THE could incorporate supplementary indicators that evaluate a university's influence on local communities or its educational outcomes in conjunction with current research and internationalization metrics. This approach would yield a more comprehensive assessment of university performance, especially for institutions focused on education and community engagement (Ćulum, 2018).

Furthermore, Webometrics could enhance its framework by incorporating metrics that evaluate research quality in addition to digital presence. Webometrics has innovatively emphasized online visibility; however, integrating metrics of academic excellence and research impact would improve the ranking's credibility and relevance for universities pursuing academic prestige (Sanchez, 2012). This would also mitigate the risk of excessive dependence on web presence, which may not consistently reflect institutional quality.

It is advisable to establish regional or national ranking systems that are customized to the specific local context. This approach may assist universities in developing countries in evaluating their performance relative to peers with comparable missions and resources rather than competing with globally recognized institutions that prevail in conventional rankings. These systems may prioritize regional concerns, including educational quality, local impact, and policy influence, thereby providing a more equitable and pertinent comparison for institutions such as HCMUE.

Improving the transparency of ranking methodologies is essential. Numerous rankings, especially QS, have faced criticism for lacking transparency regarding the weighting and analysis of subjective indicators, such as reputation surveys (Marginson, 2014). Enhancing methodological transparency would foster trust in ranking outcomes and assist universities in identifying strategies to improve their positions while maintaining their fundamental missions.

7. Conclusion

This literature review analyzed the evolution and impact of global university ranking systems, including QS, Times Higher Education (THE), and Webometrics, emphasizing their effects on higher education institutions, especially in developing countries such as Vietnam. These systems, although valuable for assessing global performance, have faced criticism in prioritizing research output and internationalization. This focus tends to advantage well-resourced institutions while neglecting universities that emphasize teaching excellence and community engagement. Recent trends, such as the incorporation of sustainability and social impact in the impact rankings, indicate a transition toward more comprehensive evaluations of university success, although research metrics continue to prevail in numerous rankings. The review highlighted deficiencies in the literature, specifically the necessity for contextualized rankings that more accurately represent the missions of institutions in developing regions, underscoring the significance of teaching and local contributions. This analysis enhances the understanding of the influence of rankings on university strategies and highlights the need for more inclusive and balanced ranking systems that consider the varied roles of universities in local and global contexts.

Ethical Considerations

Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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