



GOVERNANCE AND STRATEGIC RESPONSES TO GLOBAL RANKINGS:
EVIDENCE FROM UZBEK UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract. International university rankings have become strong tools of governance that impact strategic institutional policies and higher education reforms on the global front. In the case of emerging systems like Uzbekistan, rankings are a challenge as well as a chance to be recognized in the world. This paper presents the response of universities in Uzbekistan to the ranking pressures based on interviews with administrators of a public, private, and international branch campus university, and review of national policy documents. The results leave a very clear picture of contrasts between the private and international universities: international branding, autonomy in decision-making, and research incentives are indicators of structured approaches to ranking whereas bureaucratic rigidity, lack of autonomy, and inadequate allocation of resources characterize universities in public. The more important determinant of competitiveness turns out to be governance capacity, not ambition. The paper concludes that to achieve sustainable progress in rankings, reforms to governance are needed that increase autonomy, accountability, and institutional capacity and integrate rankings into larger education, research, and development missions.

Keywords: governance, university rankings, institutional competitiveness, higher education reform, Uzbekistan.

GLOBAL REYTINGLAR SHAROITIDA O'ZBEKISTON UNIVERSITETLARINING
BOSHQARUVI VA STRATEGIK QARORLARI

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Annotatsiya. Xalqaro universitet reytinglari oliy ta'lim boshqaruvida kuchli vosita sifatida namoyon bo'lib, ular strategik siyosatlar va islohotlarga global darajada ta'sir ko'rsatmoqda. O'zbekiston kabi rivojlanayotgan tizimlar uchun reytinglar nafaqat muammo, balki xalqaro miqyosda e'tirof etilish imkoniyatidir. Ushbu maqolada davlat, xususiy va xalqaro filial universitetlari rahbarlari bilan o'tkazilgan suhabatlar hamda milliy siyosiy hujjatlar tahliliga asoslangan holda O'zbekiston universitetlarining reyting bosimlariga bergan javoblari yoritiladi. Natijalar xususiy va xalqaro universitetlar reytinglarga tizimli yondashib, xalqaro brend yaratish, qaror qabul qilishdagi avtonomiya va ilmiy tadqiqotlarni rag'batlantirish orqali raqobatbardoshlikka erishayotganini ko'rsatadi. Davlat universitetlari esa byurokratik cheklolvar, avtonomiya yetishmasligi va resurslarning samarasiz taqsimlanishi bilan ajralib turadi. Tadqiqot shuni ko'rsatadiki, raqobatbardoshlikning muhim omili sifatida ambitsiya emas, balki boshqaruv salohiyati bиринчи о'rinda turadi. Maqolada xulosa qilinishicha, reytinglarda barqaror natijalarga erishish uchun boshqaruv islohotlari zarur bo'lib, ular avtonomiyani kengaytirishi, hisobdorlikni oshirishi, institutsional salohiyatni kuchaytirishi va

reytinglarni ta'lif, ilm-fan hamda taraqqiyotning kengroq maqsadlariga integratsiya qilishi kerak.

Kalit so'zlar: boshqaruv, universitet reytinglari, institutsional raqobatbardoshlik, olyi ta'lif islohoti, O'zbekiston.

УПРАВЛЕНИЕ И СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКИЕ ПОДХОДЫ УНИВЕРСИТЕТОВ УЗБЕКИСТАНА К ВЫЗОВАМ ГЛОБАЛЬНЫХ РЕЙТИНГОВ

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Аннотация. Международные университетские рейтинги стали мощными инструментами управления, влияющими на институциональные стратегии и реформы высшего образования во всем мире. Для таких развивающихся систем, как Узбекистан, рейтинги являются одновременно вызовом и возможностью для международного признания. В статье рассматриваются реакции университетов Узбекистана на давление рейтингов, основанные на интервью с администраторами государственных, частных и международных филиалов, а также на анализе национальных политических документов. Результаты выявили резкие различия: международные и частные университеты применяют структурированный подход к рейтингам за счет брендинга, автономии в принятии решений и стимулирования исследований, тогда как государственные вузы ограничены бюрократической жесткостью, отсутствием автономии и недостаточным распределением ресурсов. Таким образом, ключевым фактором конкурентоспособности является не амбиция, а управленческий потенциал. В заключение отмечается, что для устойчивого прогресса в рейтингах необходимы реформы управления, направленные на расширение автономии, подотчетности и институционального потенциала, а также интеграцию рейтингов в более широкие миссии образования, науки и развития.

Ключевые слова: управление, университетские рейтинги, институциональная конкурентоспособность, реформа высшего образования, Узбекистан.

Introduction.

Over the last 20 years, global university rankings like QS, Times Higher Education (THE) and Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) have emerged to be one of the most powerful governing tools in higher education. Rankings continue to influence governance frameworks, institutional policies, and policy changes in higher education systems all over the world, even though initially they were designed as mainly benchmarking instruments (Dowsett, 2020). Their effect is especially noticeable in strategic planning where universities match their research priorities, policies of internationalisation, and branding strategies with metrics of ranking in order to enhance their competitive position (Dowsett, 2020; Wandercil et al., 2022).

In the case of post-Soviet and transitional regimes like Uzbekistan, international rankings are a source of international visibility, as well as a problem of administration. On the one hand, they encourage universities to internationalise, increase the efficiency of research, and build the academic reputation (Khamidova and Jibril, 2024). There are risks associated with relying on rankings, in turn: the manipulation of the information, the financial pressure, and the distrust towards the institutions (Depo, 2024). In addition, ranking strengthens the reputational hierarchies, and young institutions are unlikely to disrupt the old trends in the world (Downing et al., 2021).

In addition to this institutional impact, rankings are becoming a policy instrument. Rankings are used by governments to assess universities, guide reforms, and make the

national strategies in line with the trends in global higher education (Kaiser et al., 2022; Stead, 2021). Nevertheless, the idea of their inclusion in the governance systems is still debated because they seldom meet the further policy objectives, including sustainability, inclusivity, and social development (Kaiser et al., 2022). Comparative analysis shows that translation of rankings into systems of national governance generates hybrid forms, which are conditioned by local context, institutional history, and political economy such as the merger reforms in Finland and in Asia national strategies (Kohvakka and Nevala, 2023; Guo et al., 2023). Global rankings have been integrated into higher education reforms by Uzbekistan where presidential measures and strategic plans are promoting universities to become more visible and enter into international league tables (Strategy.uz, 2022; Lex.uz, 2021). However, there is also a paradox: national policies encourage ranking of participation, and universities have certain barriers to governance: lack of autonomy, undeveloped research economies, bureaucracy. This brings out the key research question: in what ways do universities in Uzbekistan strategically react to global ranking pressures within their governance limitations?

This research contributes to the higher education governance and rankings literature in a variety of ways:

- **Contextualising Rankings in Emerging Systems:** It offers one of the earliest intensive empirical studies of the strategic response of universities within Uzbekistan- an under-researched, transitional higher education system to global ranking pressures.
- **Governance-Capacity Lens:** The article goes beyond the descriptive explanations of ranking participation by showing the structural determinants of competitiveness in emerging economies by emphasizing on governance capacity and institutional autonomy.
- **Differentiation by Institutional Type:** The paper compares the reactions of public, private, and international branch campuses and finds that governance models do mediate the adaptations to rankings.
- **Insights Policy-Relevant:** It is also able to see some institutional obstacles (bureaucracy, resource allocation, data transparency) and provide actionable suggestions to reform governance, adjusting national aspirations to the realities of the institution.

Literature Review.

The global university ranking is not just an information tool anymore but has been integrated into the governance of higher education throughout the world. They influence the goal setting, resource allocation activities, and research and internationalisation strategies of universities (Dowsett, 2020; Wandercil et al., 2022). Rankings directly inform the institutional development agenda in such contexts as Australia, Brazil, and Northern Europe, to create plans and priorities in governance at regional levels (Dowsett, 2020; Wandercil et al., 2022). Nonetheless, strategic manipulation, financial pressure and loss of institutional trust are some of the risks associated with the impact they have (Depo, 2024).

Rankings also create reputational inequalities and stratification in higher education, creating long-lasting differences between the elite universities and the ones located in the academic outskirts (Downing et al., 2021; Uzhegova and Baik, 2020). There is growing demand among scholars to reform it, such as making the assessment criteria more comprehensive and making the stakeholders more aware of the drawbacks of rankings (Depo, 2024). Irrespective of their deficiencies, rankings have been very influential governance tools in shaping institutional behaviour, policy in higher education, and the ranking of academies all over the world (Holesch et al., 2025).

Governments are starting to utilize rankings as policy tools, which go hand in hand with quality assurance systems to set the change of direction (Kaiser et al., 2022). They are a part of a larger group of tools in information-based policy, which attempt to incentivise institutional change with benchmarking and comparison (Ulibarri et al., 2021). However, as

opposed to regulatory or capacity-building interventions, rankings are not as useful in bringing transformational reforms (Ulibarri et al., 2021). Their influences are frequently refracted through national frames, and the result of this process is often hybrid and even contradictory (Kohvakka & Nevala, 2023). The example of university mergers in Finland is relevant to the way in which convergence induced by the ranking is locally re-conceived to create national hybrids. The Asia-Pacific region is experiencing tangible shifts in global rankings based on state investment and state policy (Guo et al., 2023). The experience of China shows that it is possible to create national frameworks to counter international standards, and Kazakhstan has already undertaken the path of globalisation and autonomy reforms to achieve a better position in the ranking (Kaldybay et al., 2024). Conversely, the very centralised project of the Russian Project 5-100 did not always have a positive effect, which highlights the issue of centralisation of governance and global competitiveness (Kang and Mok, 2023).

The autonomy and governance capacity are decisive in defining the response to the ranking pressures in the universities. Branding, research incentives, and international collaboration can be mobilised more easily in universities that are more flexible (e.g. in terms of private or internationally affiliated campuses) (WIUT, WUT, BMU). In contrast, the challenges of public universities are systemic: inflexible decision-making, restricted funding of research and reliance on centralised governance (BSMI, TSUE, TSTU). These results are like the international research underlining that autonomy allows the universities to be more responsive, whereas bureaucratic governance limits such responsiveness (Munusamy and Hashim, 2020; Lee and Stensaker, 2021). The strategy of universities may involve the targeted incentives in research, the improved internationalisation, and strategic branding (Wit and Jones, 2022; Li and Yin, 2022). Nevertheless, the approach of limited attention to ranking measures is associated with the risk of instrumentalism in which universities focus on short-term benefits to achieve sustainable competitiveness (Soysal et al., 2020; Soysal et al., 2022). Rankings should be part of a wider set of teaching, research, and societal development initiatives that help create long-term influence (Clarke and Kirby, 2022).

Methods.

The paper will use a qualitative case study design, which will involve an interview-based evidence and policy document analysis to investigate how the Uzbekistan universities address the challenges of global rankings. The triangulated knowledge of the dynamics of governance using multiple sources of data prevents the dependence on a single approach.

Case Selection

To choose various governance models, four universities were chosen:

- Westminster International University in Tashkent (WIUT) - an international branch campus with significant autonomy.
- Webster University in Tashkent (WUT) - another international branch campus with U.S. accreditation.
- British Management University (BMU) - private university, which is just starting to be internationalized.
- Bukhara State Medical Institute (BSMI) - a state-owned entity that is run more traditionally.

This choice allowed cross-public-private-international comparison of governance frameworks of branches, and this comparison gave results about how the type of institution influenced the ranking responses.

Data Collection

The data were gathered in two phases:

Semi-structured Interviews

They interviewed top-level administrators, faculty, and international office officials in the four universities.

The questions were focused on strategic responses to rankings, governance structures, resource allocation, research priorities and internationalisation strategies.

Policy Document Analysis

These were major national policy documents that were analysed to contextualise institutional strategies, including:

- National Development Strategy for 2017–2021 (Strategy.uz, 2022);
- Presidential Decree PD-5117 on Higher Education Reform (Lex.uz, 2021).
- Digital Uzbekistan 2030 Strategy (Lex.uz, 2020).
- Higher Education 2030 Agenda (Uzbekistan.org, 2019).
- National Development Strategy for 2017–2021 (Strategy.uz, 2022);
- Presidential Decree PD-5117 on Higher Education Reform (Lex.uz, 2021).
- Digital Uzbekistan 2030 Strategy (Lex.uz, 2020).

These reports were reviewed to determine the effects of state policy directives on the manner of governing and prioritizing the priorities.

Data Analysis.

Interpretation of all transcripts of interviews and policy documents were coded thematically in an iterative fashion. The early codes were based on some fundamental themes of governance capacity, autonomy, resources allocation, research productivity, and internationalisation. Themes became narrowed to reflect cross-institutional tendencies and variations in strategic responses.

Results.

Universities were found to be more autonomous with regard to governance structures resulting in the reporting of a higher number of private and international as WIUT, WUT, and BMU, which had the ability to be strategic in responding to rankings. These institutes emphasized that they could invest in research, employ foreign faculty, and use the benefits of branding. On the contrary, governmental enterprises such as BSMI described decision-making as being bureaucratically constrained, having little potential to co-ordinate strategies with ranking frameworks.

Branding and reputation management were the focus of the responses at the international branch campuses. U.S. accreditation was an advantage to WUT, and WIUT institutionalised this by installing a Sustainable Development and International Rankings Officer. In comparison, public universities were more dependent on government policy guidance and external donor initiatives, as a form of compliance, and not proactive strategic branding.

Research was always recognized as important to performance ranking by universities. WIUT and BMU provided incentives to encourage the faculty to publish in Journals indexed in Scopus, and WUT encouraged development of faculty research. Public institutions on the other hand cited lack of adequate funding and facilities to support research output despite the awareness on the importance of this.

It was also widely viewed that internationalisation was part of rankings, although approaches were different. WIUT and WUT have used international contacts and global cooperation to enhance their competitiveness, whereas BMU sought to have a dual-degree status and aimed at foreign relations. BSMI participated in exchange programmes and was not well organised in terms of internationalisation.

Systemic governance barriers identified by interviewees included weak autonomy, disjointed cooperation between local universities, absence of tracking alumni, and poor data disclosure. The university representatives restated that in the absence of more robust

governance capacity, the work of Uzbek universities is doomed to remain symbolic instead of transformative.

Discussion.

The results demonstrate that the reaction of Uzbek universities to rankings is highly mediated by governance forms. In line with the international literature, greater adaptability through the autonomy of governance is possible, and bureaucracy restricts responsiveness (Dowsett, 2020; Munusamy and Hashim, 2020). Universities which are internationally affiliated show organised approaches, integrating branding, research incentives, and internationalisation whilst public institutions continue to rely on government direction and project led by donations (Reuben Plance and Owen, 2023; Erkkila and Piironen, 2020).

One of the most important issues in governance was the resource allocation. Government funds are given to facilitate ranking ambitions, but the public universities have not established proper distribution frameworks that lead to inefficiencies and piecemeal initiatives. This is in line with the comparative results in Russia and other post-Soviet regimes, where centralised reforms have not been able to result in sustained ranking gains (Kang and Mok, 2023).

On the strategic level, the focus of universities on internationalisation and research is an internationalisation trend and a ranking-based adaptation pattern (Li and Yin, 2022). But the very thin conceptualization of metrics poses a threat of instrumentalism, in which the visibility of the short term is valued over sustainable competitiveness (Soysal et al., 2020; Mittelmeier and Yang, 2022). Rather, governance reforms must make rankings part of larger educative, research, and social development missions (Clarke and Kirby, 2022; Kaiser et al., 2022).

The experience of Kazakhstan suggests that reforms to achieve autonomy and investments in internationalisation may bring concrete ranking benefits (Kaldybay et al., 2024), and in the example of Project 5-100 in Russia, the over-centralised nature of governance may be quite limiting (Guo et al., 2023). Uzbekistan therefore has a governance dilemma; to strike a balance between robust state ambitions and institutional flexibility and capacity-building.

Conclusion.

This paper shows that the practice of global ranking among Uzbek universities is not as much driven by ambition as by governance capacity. Internationally affiliated and private institutions, which enjoy more freedom, have been able to introduce systematic strategies which are in line with ranking frameworks. These involve making investments in research incentives, establishing international partnerships and creating branding efforts that make them more competitive. Yet, the public universities are still bound by bureaucratic inflexibility, lack of resources, and lack of policy fit that prevent their effective response to the pressure of the ranking.

The governance reforms are needed in Uzbekistan to get sustainable competitiveness. Increasing institutional autonomy would enable universities to take more strategic decisions in a more responsive way. Concurrently, there should be enhanced governance capacity, which is more transparent when it comes to the allocation of resources, accountability systems and stakeholder involvement in governance to facilitate meaningful reform. The idea of participation should not be ranked in the vacuum of failure, but it should be incorporated in the broader teaching, researching and social-development missions. In absence of this integration, universities will run the risk of seeking short term symbolic benefits at the expense of long-term competitiveness.

The continued existence of global rankings will be one characteristic of higher education governance in Uzbekistan. Nonetheless, the potential of rankings as driving forces towards

development can only be fulfilled when rankings are considered as an inclusive reform agenda. Uzbekistan can use national policy goals in accordance with institutional realities, investing in the institutions of governance that place greater emphasis on autonomy, accountability and capacity building, to translate ranking pressures into the opportunities of developing a higher education system that is more competitive and globally visible.

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