A qualitative exploration of motivations and challenges for universities seeking to join the university rankings race

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Abstract

Joining university rankings has become increasingly significant in recent years characterized by intense competition in global higher education. Although there are some benefits to these rankings, there are also some disadvantages. This study sought to determine universities' motivations and possible challenges for joining global university rankings and offer recommendations to institutions seeking ranking. This was a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews to collect data from 24 participants selected from universities in the United Kingdom, the United States, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Sudan, Egypt, Australia, Oman, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. Thematic analysis resulted in the themes, motives for joining university rankings and pressures and challenges in joining the university rankings. Some of the common reasons for joining rankings included: increasing funding, attracting distinguished scholars and instructors, and gaining a better reputation. Some of the challenges included in joining university rankings were: western domination, publication issues, and administrative issues.

Keywords: benefits, challenges, higher education, motives, university ranking, western domination

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سعي الجامعات للانضمام إلى التصنيفات العالمية: الدوافع والتحديات

الملخص العربي

أصبح الانضمام إلى التصنيفات العالمية لمؤسسات التعليم العالي أمرًا مهمًا بشكل متزايد في السنوات الأخيرة، كما اتسمت بالمنافسة الشديدة بين المؤسسات الجامعية. وعلى الرغم من وجود بعض الفوائد لهذه التصنيفات العالمية، إلا أن هناك أيضًا بعض العيوب. سعت هذه الدراسة إلى تحديد دوافع الجامعات والتحديات المحتملة للانضمام إلى تصنيفات الجامعات العالمية، وتقديم توصيات للمؤسسات التي تسعى للحصول على مراتب جيدة في التصنيفات. هذه الدراسة النوعية استخدمت المقابلات شبه المنظمة لجمع البيانات من ٢٤ مشاركًا تم اختيارهم من جامعات في المملكة المتحدة والولايات المتحدة والمملكة العربية السعودية ونيجيريا والسودان ومصر وأستراليا وعمان وتركيا والإمارات العربية المتحدة. نتج عن التحليل الموضوعي للبيانات بروز عدد من الموضوعات والدوافع للانضمام إلى التصنيفات، وعدد من الضغوط والتحديات في الانضمام إلى تصنيفات الجامعات. ومن بين الأسباب الشائعة للانضمام إلى التصنيفات: زيادة التمويل، وجذب العلماء والمدرسين المتميزين، واكتساب سمعة أفضل. أما بعض التحديات التي تبرز في السعي إلى الانضمام إلى التصنيفات الجامعية فكانت: الهيمنة الغربية، وقضايا النشر، والقضايا الإدارية.

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1. Introduction

Becoming a part of global university rankings is considered a significant achievement. According to Pucciarelli and Kaplan (2016), this is because universities and higher education institutions operate in a crowded global marketplace affected by factors such as globalisation, digitalisation, and the growing role of expert decision-makers. Alma et al. (2016) elucidate that the increasing competition and the need to attain competitiveness due to globalization have popularized university ranking systems. Stack (2021) points out that for most institutions of higher learning ignoring university rankings is tantamount to becoming invisible. Hence, most institutions of higher learning around the world desire to make it to the list and rank high. Torabian (2019) notes that the global university rankings have changed the social construction of universities. Accordingly, this is a situation that has led to higher education policies, governance strategies, and institutional practices becoming developed within an international competition encompassing aggressive marketing. This is reiterated by Enders (2012) who affirms, university rankings have resulted in universities around the world becoming engaged in performance management and branding.

Previous research has explained the reasons behind universities' desire for ranking (Daniela et al., 2012; Hazelkorn, 2014; Tuesta et al., 2019; Vidal & Ferreira, 2020). For example, Hazelkorn (2014) claimed that universities believe global rankings have tangible benefits, with international research students using

short-listed institutions to make their university choices. Rankings help universities attract the best and most talented students as well as investment and funds for their mission and scientific research (Vidal & Ferreira, 2020; Tuesta et al., 2019). This is further reiterated by Yudkevich and Altbach (2015) who explain that some of the benefits that universities can gain from the global rankings are high international visibility, funds from private funding agencies, philanthropists, industry and government, and more opportunities for their graduates to secure good employment, and interest from top tier prospective students and instructors. Boulton (2011) opines university rankings influence the perceptions and priorities of businesses, students, and the government.

Pavel (2015) elucidate, global university rankings have emerged to determine the performance of higher education institutions from around the world following some pre-established indicators. Additionally, Dembereldorj (2018) notes that global university rankings are integral in fostering the design of national policies of higher education building competence. Therefore, university ranking has become imperative for universities to adopt various strategies, such as pure market and marketing logic, to attract teaching talent and students. Pouris and Pouris (2010) explicate that university rankings provide marketing and assessment opportunities. Within a globalizing world, students, funders, and staff want to be associated with a high-ranking university. While guaranteeing future growth and strengthening relationships with diverse partners (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016), the commercialisation of knowledge and research significantly influences a university's reputation at home and internationally.

Furthermore, the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) (2007) found that rankings are incentives to recruit minority and socially disadvantaged students. These students were deemed crucial to enhancing their ranking positions (Tuesta et al., 2019; Daniela et al., 2012). A 2017 Oxford University publication focusing on higher education trends revealed that various factors—

such as the pressure to get a job after graduation, student mobility, and government involvement in university internationalisation—pushed institutions to improve their education quality (Griffith, 2017). Inevitably, good rankings make these schools more attractive to local and international students.

However, the way that rankings are structured can challenge universities. For example, Vernon et al. (2018) found that existing ranking systems did not incorporate innovation culture as a part of their intellectual disclosures. Moreover, rankings are also biased toward universities with classes taught in the English language, which raises comprehensiveness and accuracy issues. Carey (2006) indicates that university rankings can be flawed when they fail to focus on the fundamental issues of the best ways of educating students and preparing them for a successful life after college. Therefore, there are some issues and particularly methodological problems with university rankings. Goglio (2016) explains that university rankings consist of methodological limitations. Andrés (2017) indicate that rankings have the disadvantage of failing to be explicative in terms of quality. Bergseth et al. (2014) identified some inconsistencies in university rankings' quality assessments, which raised questions about ranking quality variations and the ethical assessment models used to measure higher education quality. Bautista-Puig and Orduña-Malea (2022) point out that the global university rankings are subject to some criticism because of the vague concepts that they measure and considerable biases.

Research Problem

Although higher education rankings seem important for students, institutions, and even governments, many institutions find it difficult to join the rankings. There has been significant criticism over the methods and criteria used in the rankings. For instance, some criteria show discrimination from some universities such as those from non-English speaking nations. This is something that causes considerable confusion regarding the motives of universities joining the university ranking race. Further, the criticism over the methods and criteria used for university rankings illustrates the

challenges faced by universities seeking to join the university rankings race. At the same, the criteria applied for university rankings cause difficulty for some universities that lack the resources to meet the criteria preventing them from joining the university rankings. Therefore, this study used data collected from semi-structured interviews with education experts in the fields of quality and accreditation, planning, and educational leadership worldwide to explore the issue of university rankings by seeking to answer the following questions: what are universities' motivations to join university rankings, what are the possible challenges they face, and what are universities required to do to join the rankings race? The findings of this study contribute to the expansion of the literature on the university ranking race. Therefore, the purpose of this research study was to fill the gap in the literature regarding the university rankings race by conducting an exploration of the key motivations and challenges faced by universities in joining the race.

Materials and Methods

This section illustrates the methods used to explore the research problem and address the research questions.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research strategy. As Eyisi (2016) commented, qualitative research involves using instruments, such as observation and in-depth interviews, that evoke, recall, and assist in problem-solving. Qualitative instruments enable data collection in natural environments, thus allowing for a better understanding of behaviour (Rahman, 2016). Therefore, because qualitative approaches gather factual and descriptive information on real people and situations, this approach was deemed most suitable for this study.

The primary data collection method was semi-structured interviews that allowed for open-ended questions and provided space for more in-depth exploration of the study inquiry (Adams, 2015; McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Semi-structured interviews are one of the common forms of data collection methods in education

research (Punch & Oancea, 2014). The interviews were conducted over the internet, which was inexpensive, enabling participant involvement from across the world and allowing for anonymity.

Instruments-Framework

Before conducting the interviews, implementing a flexible framework defined the issues and key questions. For uniformity, all questions and sub-questions designed were similar enabling the attainment of the research aims. The interview framework was piloted on two Saudi University volunteers who agreed that the questions were straightforward and understandable and the given response time was reasonable. The interviewees were asked the following questions:

1. From your perspective, should universities strive to join international university rankings?
2. From your perspective, what are the primary motives that lead universities to work on joining the international university rankings?
3. From your perspective, what are the main pressures and challenges that universities might face while seeking to be in the international university rankings?
4. What are the most prominent recommendations and proposals for universities seeking to enter the lists of international university rankings?

   1. Participants

Purposive sampling was used for selecting the research participants. Additionally, search engines identified the appropriate candidates and their email addresses and workplaces to ensure that the participants were decision-makers in their respective universities, with factors such as profiles, articles, and works guiding the selection. The potential participants were professors, associate professors, assistant professors, and lecturers. These were academics and research staff with an interest in higher education administration, development, and quality management and assurance in higher education institutions. Further, these participants are active members in matters of higher education as they seat on

ranking project committees. Of the 55 invitations sent via email to various academics, 24 accepted to take part in the study. The final participants were critical stakeholders with experience in the education sector in the United States (U.S.), Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom (U.K.), Nigeria, the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E), Australia, Egypt, Oman, Turkey, and Sudan (See Table 1). The academic ranks of the 24 participants are 8.3 professors, 12.5% associate professors, 66.7% assistant professors, and 12.5 lecturers. Because of confidentiality and privacy and request by the participants, this study does not reveal the exact universities from which the research participants were selected.

Table 1. Participants and countries of origin

Country	Number of Participants
The United States (U.S.)	2
Saudi Arabia	4
The United Kingdom (U.K.)	2
Nigeria	2
The United Arab Emirates	4
Australia	2
Egypt	2
Oman	2
Turkey	2
Sudan	2
Total	24

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis. This method is suitable for exploratory research because it enables the researcher to use various types of information to increase data accuracy systematically (Guest et al., 2011). Further, it allows for a better interpretation of people's experiences, events, or organisations (Boyatzis, 1998). Guided by Braun and Clarke (2006), Namey et al. (2008), and Boyatiz (1998), the first step entailed a familiarisation with the transcribed data. The transcripts were read multiple times, some themes distinguished, and unique characteristics identified and

coded, with all relevant codes then marked as potential themes. The coded thematic extracts were then checked, and an analysis map was created. Further analysis refined, clearly defined, and named the themes. Finally, a summary of the issues related to each theme was written, and associated quotes were identified and presented in the results.

Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability were conducted to enhance the quality of this study and therefore ensure rigor. Validity was determined by using a skilled moderator. Cypress (2017) elucidates that using a skilled moderator will foster validity because it results in eliminating the effects of personal bias by the researchers. This was essential in enhancing the accuracy and trustworthiness of the data. The respondent validation was also essential in ensuring validity. The reliability was ensured using the dimensions of credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The credibility was attained by ensuring that there the participants provided a detailed description of their experiences ensuring that there was no distortion. Dependability was attained by the process of Horizontaling the collected data and the identification of the emerging themes. Confirmability was conducted using the quotes by the participants to support the description of the research phenomenon. The participants were not given the transcripts to review, instead, the authors in their role as the research instrument asked for clarification of the answers provided including additional explanations.

Results

This section highlights the key themes relating to the motivations and challenges identified in the thematic analysis conducted for this study.

1. Theme 1: Motives for Joining University Rankings
1. Subtheme 1.1: Funding

Funding was a critical issue necessitating joining university ranking. Many participants felt that they could attract public and private investment in their respective universities if these institutions were

to join the university rankings. The desire for investment was most notable among participants from the U.S., Saudi Arabia, the U.K., Australia, and Turkey. One of the respondents claimed:

> *Funding is important to our university. It is a critical factor for survival in any institution. We need money for all our activities. Therefore, I believe that being ranked could open doors for more investment. Businesses and people love being associated with high-performing institutions. Thus, being ranked is one way of attracting donors.*

This statement emphasizes that funding challenges drive the university to seek international recognition. Interestingly, no African universities in the study expressed a need for external funding. However, universities in the U.S., the U.K., Australia, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia were compelled to gain greater access to government funds. While the various stakeholders wished to gain greater access to funding, there was no clear indication of how they would spend it. However, for some universities in the U.S., Saudi Arabia, the U.K., Australia, and Turkey, the funding was for improving scientific research. One of the respondents admitted:

> *I would be very happy if my university were famous for research. We really want to conduct our studies and contribute to or challenge existing knowledge. We always teach our students using others' work, while we should also be citing our findings. However, we cannot undertake such endeavours because of financial constraints. I am confident that the rankings would bring in more donors to fund our work.*

Subtheme 1.2: Education Quality

Education quality was also important. All participants from the participating nations of US, Saudi Arabia, UK, Nigeria, UAE, Australia, Egypt, Oman, Turkey, and Sudan agreed that joining the rankings would increase their institution's efficiency and education quality as well as research quality. By efficiency, this refers to the

provision of the best education and teaching opportunities that makes the university competitive. A respondent noted:

> *Yes. I believe that being ranked would propel the institution to have higher standards. Everyone will be watching us, and there are specific guidelines to which we must adhere. This would make the education quality very high because we will be competing globally.*

This statement shows a positive relationship between the rankings and the overall performance of an institution indicating a better quality of education. This demonstrates institutions that utilize better academic resources in teaching students. Additionally, the recognition of institutional excellence, which signifies high-quality education, was noted by all participants. However, while improving research quality was mentioned only in the Arab countries, Turkey, and Sudan, high-quality research was considered essential to all institutions.

Subtheme 1.3: Recruitment of Distinguished Scholars and Instructors

Attracting highly skilled personnel was considered vital. Participants felt that joining the rankings would enable their institutions to recruit notable academics, researchers, and international students. As highlighted by the following participant's statement, it is evident that schools want skill diversity:

> *Universities are constantly looking for the best people, which can be challenging if no one knows you. This is undoubtedly the case in my school. If people see that our institution is ranked among the best, they will want to come and study, teach, or undertake research here. That way, we will have a diverse population.*

This statement shows that a reputable brand can attract the best students and scholars. It also confirms that universities desire to join rankings to attract the best scholars and instructors. Thus, the need to recruit students and instructors that will enhance the competitiveness of the university is a major motive for joining rankings.

Subtheme 1.4: Reputation

This study finds that gaining a high ranking positively affects institutional reputation. Local and international recognition increases the confidence of the graduates, which in turn assists them in finding employment after graduation. In other words, institutional popularity benefits both students and the institutions, as two respondents claimed:

> *You know, right now, everyone hopes to get employed after leaving school. Many graduates want their chances of employment to be high if they graduate from a certain school. Consequently, this brings demand to the school. That is why it is important to be ranked.*

> *Graduates will definitely go where they know their success chances are high. If a school is ranked among the best, it will attract many students because they will be guaranteed jobs when they leave campus.*

Competing with the best also strengthens an organisation's brand; therefore, some universities, especially those in the African and Arab states, wish to become a part of the university rankings. They said they wished to emulate other institutions to increase their popularity and show off. Being a part of the rankings also made it possible for the universities to compete with other institutions and demonstrate that their country had a robust education sector. This was especially true in the Arab and African countries, as one respondent claimed:

> *You know, we are eager to prove to the world that there is more to our country than corruption, poverty, and war. When people read or hear about my country, they assume the worst. This has negatively affected the public's perception of our institutions. Thus, being ranked is an opportunity to change this narrative. It shows others that they can trust our system and come study here.*

Theme 2: Pressures and Challenges in Joining the University Rankings

1. Subtheme 2.1: Resources

Lack of resources has meant that some universities have struggled to join the ranks, as stated by the participants from Nigeria, Egypt, Oman, Turkey, and Sudan. These funding problems arose from a lack of government or private sector support, which means that these universities have inadequate funds to cater to the demands that would come with being part of the university rankings. One of the respondents claimed:

Our universities lack the necessary funds for research and other pursuits that would make it possible to be ranked. We cannot compete with other institutions that are more advanced and better funded. The universities that rank highly usually have enough resources.

However, some universities do not want to join the ranks to avoid scrutiny. This was more evident in the African and Arab states. If the universities were ranked, they would come under greater scrutiny from society and have to explain how they were spending their resources and be accused of not using their budgets correctly.

Subtheme 2.2: Institutional Administrative Issues

Administrative challenges also inhibited ranking opportunities. Many participants claimed that their universities, particularly in the African and Arab nations, did not have the planning skills or qualified staff to help them keep up with higher education developments and reach the standards needed for university rankings. However, in some cases, the administration was not motivated to join the rankings as they deemed these rankings unimportant. Some participants from the African and Arab countries claimed their management did not support the staff and students' research efforts, did not allocate funds for these pursuits, had no clear scientific research plans, and invested little effort in convincing the academics about the importance of joining the rankings.

For instance, one of the participants identified administrative issues relating to ranking as:

The lack of complete conviction of the importance of joining the international classifications and the prior planning for that.

Another participant explained these administrative issues to include:

> The lack of financial support for research, as well as the lack of interest from colleges and departments in their sites.

> The policy, structural, and infrastructure changes necessary to join the rankings were expensive and distorted the regular university administration procedures, which could cause internal conflicts and staff resistance, especially if their positions were endangered and the staff did not want to take on any extra work to improve standards. All participants mentioned that staff resistance was a common complaint as university staff was unwilling to compete without job security. Because many instructors are hired on short-term work contracts, there were few incentives for competition.

Subtheme 2.3: Publication Issues

Except for the U.S. and U.K. participants, the other participants did not feel motivated to conduct independent research and publish it, claiming that the students and instructors in these institutions did not have enough resources or support to conduct scientific research, which was generally demoralising. The quality of existing publications also reduced their ability to use publications to join the rankings. The Arab nation participants commented that there had been a decrease in the quality of scientific research and several published papers. Getting published in peer-reviewed journals was a painstaking process, which made it generally unappealing. For instance, one of the participants opined:

> Insufficient support for scientific research and lack of encouraging members to publish useful and effective
> While another participant notes, "weakness of scientific research plans"

Subtheme 2.4: Western Domination

Based on the responses provided by the research participants from the developing nations, there is an issue of western domination in the global university rankings. The non-western university participants feared that joining the rankings would jeopardize their values and identities according to the findings of this study. They would have to accept western education rules and values and be forced to use English, which they felt was a demotivating factor. According to one of the research participants:

It is difficult to apply the same criteria to all universities in the world. in developing counties, leaders seek to make their universities joining the list of world class universities will be under the pressure of internal and external environment.

Further, the above statement demonstrates that there is no equality between universities from the developed and developing world when it comes to rankings. Universities from developing nations must contend with the possibility of dealing with internal and external pressures on their desire to join the rankings. This will include the possibility of lower ranking or difficulty in joining the rankings because of western domination.

Discussion

This study found that funding was a major motive for joining the university rankings race. Universities want to attract funding sources from different parties to help them complete their projects. According to the results, attaining this goal entails becoming part of the ranking system. Correspondingly, existing studies have also identified the financial motives for joining university rankings. For example, Sandstrom (2016) found that many governments used rankings to allocate funds to higher education institutions capable of becoming world-class schools. Elsevier's university rankings report found that rankings were vital in helping funding bodies make university investment decisions. Picker (2007), Vidal and Ferreira (2020), and Tuesta et al. (2019) found that quality ranking information encouraged higher spending in state-funded colleges. The higher the ranking, the more government investment in each

student. Therefore, a university becoming ranked can attract greater financial rewards.

The quality of education is yet another reason for joining the university rankings according to the findings of this study. These findings reiterate those of Picker (2007) and Ale Ebrahim et al. (2015) who also found that the quality of education improved with greater research output. Hallinger (2014) reiterates university rankings are vital in the assessment of the quality of higher education institutions. However, Vernon et al. (2018) found that ranking systems did not focus on academic quality; rather, they relied on subjective reputation and luxury indicators such as the number of awards received and the number of high-ranking executives. Therefore, while ranking may improve education quality, it is not a guarantee considering these identified discrepancies.

This study finds that the need to acquire a good reputation further influences the decision of some universities to join the university rankings race. Various studies have had similar findings on the importance of ranking a school's reputation. Ivančević and Luković, (2018) in their study indicate that a university ranking list can lead to prestige. Sauder and Espeland (2009) claimed that reputation was a crucial factor in the compilation of rankings based on the weightings applied to several measures and the final composite score. Rankings are a factor influencing a student's decision to apply to certain universities. For example, Munisamy et al. (2014) found that career prospects and a university's reputation were integral factors when selecting higher education institutions. Similarly, Hazelkorn (2012) found that graduate students, and especially international students, were more likely to use rankings to inform their schooling decisions. In a study on university presidents in 2006, Hazelkorn (2011) also found that 63 per cent were using their rankings to attract students and emphasize their results on their web pages and in promotional speeches.

According to the findings of this study, the need to recruit distinguished scholars and instructors influences some universities to take part in the rankings race. Similar findings are demonstrated in the literature. Ale Ebrahim et al. (2013) found that publications and citations were important to universities, helped institutions excel, and increased enrolment rates, which strengthened the brand. Similarly, Gruber (2014) found that rankings attracted high-impact researchers, such as Nobel Prize nominees and recipients, and increased international student admissions. From a survey of U.S. and U.K. employees, Thakur (2007) and Vidal and Ferreira (2020) found that rankings affected employer choice. In other words, the universities the employees attended influenced subsequent hiring practices.

The findings of the present study indicate that the lack of resources was a major factor undermining the ambition of universities to join the university rankings race. Davis (2016) identifies resources as the budgetary and physical assets of an institution. Some of the participants raised the point that weak budgets meant that there were limited funds to spend on research, improve education quality, invest in scientific experiments, or build proper research infrastructure. Therefore, a lack of investment would mean an inability to join international rankings. McPhedran (2013) found that the lack of financial resources derailed popular universities from participating or rising through the university rankings. Ageing technology and the inability to publish in English were other challenges.

Further, various institutional administrative issues undermined the ability of some higher institutions to join university rankings. Sauder and Espeland (2009) made similar findings by explaining that influential internal university stakeholders and even Deans rejected the need for rankings. Some even tried to boycott the USN by failing to provide enough information. Morriss and Henderson (2008) found that educators objected to rankings as they influenced every institutional decision and even affected people's identities. In an earlier study, Sauder and Espeland (2006) focused

on the effect of rankings on law faculties. They found that rankings resulted in many changes in education, resource distribution, and the definition of the universities' status. Furthermore, Carey (2006) claimed that rankings minimized institutional independence and control over reputation and forced universities to behave in a certain way, which affected both operations and diversity, with some universities being influenced by the rankings to move away from excellence to pursue wealth. Therefore, many staff and administrators view the pursuit of rankings as having detrimental effects on university operations.

The importance of publications as part of university rankings has been a contentious issue. Shahbazi-Moghadam et al. (2015) found that journal reputation in the Web of Science indexing affected university recognition as articles was expected to generally enhance institutional affiliation, which meant that rejections and publication delays could impact institutional reputation and lead to lower academic levels. Gruber (2014) noted that citations could be manipulated, which could disadvantage early career academics. It was possible to have low-impact publications in high-ranking journals and vice versa, thus making citations somewhat unreliable when included as part of the ranking's rubric. Amara et al. (2015) added that scholars in higher-ranked institutions were more likely to receive a higher number of citations, which meant that lower-ranked institutions had a lower chance of gaining a favourable ranking based on publications and citations.

The findings of this study indicated that western domination was yet another reason hindering universities from joining the university rankings races. According to the participants of this study, in most of the ranking's list, western-based universities are ranked higher and more. Similar findings are made in research such as that by Boulton (2011) who notes that the Shanghai tables were dominated by US institutions. Swan (2015) made similar findings that the impact of western research domination concerning the need to use English led to biased rankings when the research was used as

an indicator, with one professor claiming that English was the favoured language, which is why Arabic publications attracted far fewer citations. Therefore, because the systems were developed based on western criteria, there was dissatisfaction expressed by Arab scholars. Reddy et al. (2016) explain this as the western domination of university rankings is due to the concept originally evolving from the western world. Badran and Badran (2019) found that rankings favoured English language publications, system indicators more preferred American/European journals than those from the Middle East and North African countries, and specific academics used citation manipulation from specific institutions to manipulate a rise in ranking position. Additionally, Liu (2015) commented that higher education rankings were problematic as they were based on western perspectives. Liu (2015) referred to an event comparing Chinese to US universities, concluding that western models were the archetypes for top universities and that other institutions should aim to replicate these models. Therefore, the westernisation of ranking systems had resulted in an uneven playing field. The study by Estera and Shahjahan, (2019) illustrates western dominance in university rankings by pointing to the invisible whiteness entailing white students occupying the default student representation in global university rankings imagery. However, Shreeve (2020) claimed that criticizing western-dominated ranking systems diverted attention from countries in traditionally peripheral locations that used these ranking systems to provide direction and inclusion alongside top-ranking institutions outside their geographical ambit.

Recommendations

An investigation of the motives and challenges for joining the global university rankings results in several recommendations discussed below.

Better Planning

This study recommends better planning by universities for joining the rankings. Universities need to formulate strategic plans if they wish to be a part of the global university rankings. This plan

would entail clearly defining the goals that joining the rankings should achieve, setting specific time frames, and ensuring the maintenance of the high-quality standards set by the various agencies. Management needs to emphasize that the primary benefit of rankings is enhancing the quality of education delivery and research, not just showing off, which means that benchmarking other institutions before making any changes would be critical. Consequently, these measures would enable universities to understand how to budget for change and compare values. The Arab countries, Sudan, and Turkey need to benchmark carefully before implementing any strategies. Marginson (2007) found that universities adopted specific institutional policies to improve their ranking positions; therefore, creating a strategy is essential to ensuring that universities use strategic goals to guide their activities.

Administrative Changes

There should be administrative changes for successfully joining university rankings. University administrations need to ensure that all the programs offered to meet the needed accreditation standards within a set time frame, for which they need to employ qualified change managers. The necessary resources should be provided for scientific research, publication, and teaching; moreover, to motivate students and staff proper contracts should be provided, regular performance assessments instigated, research rewards encouraged, and collaborative inter and cross-university collaborations established. Overall, when seeking to join university rankings, awareness of the importance of consistently high-quality education standards needs to be raised across administration, management, and teaching.

Conclusion

The study explored the motives and challenges of joining university rankings using data from 24 participants from various countries. The findings suggest that universities seek ranking because of factors that bring them benefits such as access to funds; improved quality of education; recruitment of distinguished scholars, students, and instructors; and reputation. The challenges they face include lack of resources, publication issues, western domination of the system, and administrative shortcomings. Notable recommendations for universities to join rankings include better planning and administrative changes. These recommendations will improve the extent of the benefits that universities will gain from joining rankings and help them deal with the notable challenges identified in this study.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was declared.

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