INTERNATIONAL RANKINGS ON THE COMPETITIVENESS OF UNIVERSITIES IN GLOBAL EDUCATIONAL SPACE

RANKINGS INTERNACIONAIS DA COMPETITIVIDADE DAS UNIVERSIDADES NO ESPAÇO EDUCACIONAL GLOBAL

CLASIFICACIONES INTERNACIONALES SOBRE LA COMPETITIVIDAD DE LAS UNIVERSIDADES EN EL ESPACIO EDUCATIVO GLOBAL

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ABSTRACT: International university rankings are a relatively new phenomenon in the global educational space, yet over the years, they have become an authoritative tool for assessing the effectiveness of universities' functioning. The present study aims to determine the impact of the position of higher educational institutions in international rankings on the level of their competitiveness. Based on the analysis of scientific literature, the authors identify international university rankings they consider the most important and compile a typology of international university rankings. Based on an expert survey of 64 representatives of the management of Russian universities, competitive advantages of universities are defined, and the most popular international university rankings are distinguished. International rankings serve as a sophisticated tool for assessing the competitiveness of universities due to the recognition of the university in the global educational and scientific space.

KEYWORDS: Competitive advantage. Education. National interest. Teachers.

RESUMO: *Os rankings universitários internacionais são um fenômeno relativamente novo no espaço educacional global, mas ao longo dos anos, eles se tornaram uma ferramenta confiável para avaliar a eficácia do funcionamento das universidades. O presente estudo visa determinar o impacto da posição das instituições de ensino superior nos rankings internacionais no nível da sua competitividade. Com base na análise da literatura científica, os autores identificam os rankings universitários internacionais que consideram mais*

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importantes e compilam uma tipologia de rankings universitários internacionais. Com base em uma pesquisa de especialistas com 64 representantes da administração das universidades russas, são definidas as vantagens competitivas das universidades e os rankings universitários internacionais mais populares são distinguidos. Os rankings internacionais servem como uma ferramenta sofisticada para avaliar a competitividade das universidades devido ao reconhecimento da universidade no espaço educacional e científico global.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Vantagem competitiva. Educação. Interesse nacional. Professores.*

RESUMEN: *Los rankings universitarios internacionales son un fenómeno relativamente nuevo en el espacio educativo global, sin embargo, a lo largo de los años, se han convertido en una herramienta autorizada para evaluar la efectividad del funcionamiento de las universidades. El presente estudio tiene como objetivo determinar el impacto de la posición de las instituciones de educación superior en los rankings internacionales sobre el nivel de su competitividad. Con base en el análisis de la literatura científica, los autores identifican los rankings universitarios internacionales que consideran más importantes y compilan una tipología de rankings universitarios internacionales. Sobre la base de una encuesta de expertos de 64 representantes de la gestión de las universidades rusas, se definen las ventajas competitivas de las universidades y se distinguen los rankings universitarios internacionales más populares. Los rankings internacionales sirven como una herramienta sofisticada para evaluar la competitividad de las universidades debido al reconocimiento de la universidad en el espacio educativo y científico global.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Ventaja competitiva. Educación. Interés nacional. Profesores.*

Introduction

One of the main priorities in the development of education is creating a competitive higher education institution able to successfully integrate into the international scientific and educational space and provide quality educational services (CHERNYAEVA *et al*., 2021; KOVALEVA; DEKINA, 2021). In our view, to ensure the stable development of education and avoid the negative external influence of competitors, it is necessary to determine the directions of development to improve the competitiveness of higher education institutions.

In our study, we proceed from the idea that the competitiveness of higher education institutions is based on their ability to occupy and steadily maintain positions in the educational segment of the global market, which ensures dynamic growth (MARCONI; RITZEN, 2015) in the directions of innovation and integration. At the same time, a higher education institution must respond flexibly to changes in the global environment and ensure the implementation of national interests to the maximum extent possible (ALEKSANDROVA *et al*., 2021; ZAYTSEVA, 2021).

The methodologies used to compile international university rankings are designed in such a way that allows determining the place of a higher education institution in comparison with the other institutions assessed. The algorithm for calculating international rankings considers a significant number of factors and criteria (SAISANA; D 'HOMBRES; SALTELLI, 2011).

International rankings are aimed at informing consumers of educational services and allow applicants to evaluate higher education institutions, employers – to choose high-quality professionals, the government – to form the regulatory and legislative framework, and university administrations – to effectively manage educational processes (LUKMAN; KRAJNC; GLAVIČ, 2010).

The generalized evaluation of universities through a system of rankings is becoming more popular (DARAIO; BONACCORSI; SIMAR, 2015; ROTH; MCANDREW, 2018) as it allows defining the position of an institution in accordance with a certain list of criteria that assess the competitive advantages or weaknesses considering a certain group of aggregated indicators.

Literature review

The theory and methodology of university rankings have been actively studied in academic discourse for the past decades. According to researchers (JAROCKA, 2015), the phenomenon of the emergence and rapid development of international university rankings in the 21st century can be viewed as a peculiar mechanism of creating an appropriate instrument of legitimization.

In this regard, B. Millot (2015) notes that the main task of ranking compilers is to rely on the most important, fundamental criteria. Other researchers also pay attention to this aspect, most notably S. Marginson and M. van der Wende (2007) who argue that any ranking system is conditioned by the goal that researchers set for themselves and, hence, it relies on the beliefs and values on which comparison and evaluation methods rely. In this sense, all ranking systems reflect the realities of higher education incompletely (for example, successes in university research do not characterize the real situation in business education or in teaching special technical disciplines) and carry a certain margin of error (FAUZI *et al*., 2020).

P.G. Altbach (2012) indicates that rankings are a presentation of data characterized by three features: 1) vertical construction according to certain criteria of excellence; 2)

comparison of higher education institutions of the country, the region, the world; 3) the use of a limited number of indicators that are easy to measure for comparison.

Based on methodical and methodological approaches to ranking, a methodological classification of international rankings of higher education institutions has been developed (HÄGG; WEDLIN, 2013). In addition, there are rankings compiled by means of calculating the final score and the rankings of higher education institutions for specific disciplines or training programs (PEREZ-ESPARRELLS; ORDUNA-MALEA, 2018).

According to L. Harvey (2008), there are over thousand scientific publications devoted to the problem of university rankings, and this considerable body of literature can be roughly divided into two groups: 1) studies of the methodology of university rankings and 2) studies on the theoretical understanding of the phenomenon of university rankings.

In the meantime, not all education experts accept even the very idea of developing university rankings without reservation, not to mention harsh criticism of specific methodologies. For example, scholars (DARAIO; BONACCORSI, 2017) report that the leadership of many universities perceive rankings as a kind of reference point in their daily work. At the same time, the authors indicate that the academic community is quite critical of these rankings because they are often misleading regarding the true essence of modern universities and have numerous methodological limitations.

The study aims to determine the impact of the position of a higher educational institution in international rankings on the level of its competitiveness.

The hypothesis put forward suggests that international rankings act as a complex tool for assessing the competitiveness of universities due to the recognition of the university in the global educational and scientific space.

In accordance with the goal, the objectives set in the study are as follows:

1. To determine the competitive advantages of universities and identify the most popular international university rankings based on an expert survey.

2. To develop a typology of international university rankings and perform a comparative characteristic of the main international rankings based on an analysis of scientific literature.

The article consists of an introduction, literature review, research methods, research results, discussion, and conclusion.

Methods

During the first stage of the study, the sources of information necessary to accomplish the purpose of the study are selected. The data used in this study is represented by two bodies of information.

The first body consists of articles published in journals indexed by Scopus and Web of Science, collective monographs exploring the essence of international rankings of universities. The search of scientific sources on the problem under study is carried out using the keywords "university rankings", "global rankings in higher education", "university performance", "management of universities", and "international rankings" to obtain references to the relevant articles. The source base is updated by the time of publication and ranges from 2007 to the present while being limited by the availability of free access to the necessary materials. The search results included over 250 available scientific articles and monographs. However, due to the limited volume of the present article, 14 sources are considered as the most relevant to the purpose of the study.

The second body of information comes from the official websites of international university rankings.

The second stage of the study involves an analysis of information sources.

At the third stage of the study, an expert survey method in the form of an unstructured telephone interview is employed to determine the competitive advantages of universities and the most popular international university rankings.

The study covers 64 experts, representatives of the management of Russian universities with at least 10 years of teaching and management experience in higher education.

Table 1 – Teaching and management experience

	Work experience			Faculty/managerial status		
	10-15 years	15-20 years	over 20 years	associate professor	professor	head of department
men	20	12	6	25	11	5
women	14	10	2	20	8	2

Source: Devised by the authors

The experts' opinions on the various competitive advantages of universities are ranked on a scale from one (the least important criterion) to five (the most important).

Results

The experts believe that forming the international competitiveness of a university requires developing its competitive advantages, which can be defined by competencies.

Table 2 shows the expert ranks of a university's competitive advantages, which can be formed through its tangible resources, namely personnel, financial, technological, and informational resources; and intangible resources, i.e. intangible assets, image, community relations, and intellectual and organizational resources.

Table 2 – Competitive advantages of a university

Competitive advantages	Indicators of competitive advantage assessment	Expert rank
Personnel	Personnel expenses, labor productivity	2.12
Finance	Availability of stable sources of financing, efficiency of the use of financial resources	2.83
Technologies	Effectiveness of the use of educational technologies	3.29
Information	Quality and cost of information	3.63
Intangible assets	Cost of brand maintenance, patents and licenses	2.23
Intellectual resources	The level of competence of teachers, innovation and creativity of teachers	4.14
Relationships	The level of relationships with consumers of educational services, administrative bodies, international partners, business	3.11
Organizational resources	Quality of management, efficiency of decision-making processes, development of corporate culture, the level of organization	4.38

Source: Compiled from the expert survey

Table 2 indicates that the key competitive advantages, according to the experts, are the organizational and intellectual resources of the university, as well as the quality and cost of information and the efficiency of the use of educational technologies.

To the external competitive advantages and disadvantages of Russian universities, the experts attribute: a high level of education among the population; a sufficiently high-quality system of training and retraining of specialists; dynamic domestic market in education; insufficient development of university infrastructure; a high level of competition among educational institutions; an average level of integration of universities into the global space.

What the experts consider as the internal competitive advantages of Russian universities is: the level of demand in the sphere of educational services; the level of compliance of higher education standards with international standards; the information and

regulatory framework of activity; a significant share of competitors in education abroad; access of graduates to labor markets.

Based on the analysis of information obtained from the official websites of international university rankings, a typology of international rankings is compiled in Table 3.

Table 3 – Types and methodologies of international university rankings

International ranking	Distinctive feature	Methodology	Type of ranking
Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)	Compiled based on certain indicators of the university's activity	One-dimensional ranking	Traditional with the accrual of a single final score
World Reputation Rankings	The positions of universities are determined based on the results of an expert survey	One-dimensional ranking	Reputation
Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE),	Developed based on all previous assessment tools	One-dimensional ranking	Mixed, with the accrual of a single final score for specific disciplines (training programs, subjects)
QS World University Rankings (QS)	Developed based on all previous assessment tools	One-dimensional ranking	Mixed, with the accrual of a single final score for specific disciplines (training programs, subjects), cluster
U-multirank	Evaluation and comparison without aggregate indicators, involves the construction of a hierarchy	Multidimensional ranking	Mixed
U-map	Objects are grouped by similar features considering different parameters of activity	Classification	Traditional

Source: Compiled from Academic Ranking of World Universities (2021), QS World University Rankings (n.d.), Times Higher Education World University Rankings (n.d.), U-map (n.d.), U-multirank (2021), World Reputation Rankings (2020)

The results of the expert survey show that the most popular rankings are the QS World University Rankings (QS), the Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE), and the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU).

Let us proceed to the comparative characteristic of these international rankings given in Table 4.

Table 4 – Comparative characteristics of the major international rankings

Characteristics of ranking	QS	THE	ARWU
Methodology of the study	Expert-analytical study, ranking	Interviews with experts, statistical analysis, ranking	Statistical analysis, ranking
Direction of the study	Scientific and educational activities		
Types of rankings	Global, by subjects, departments, regions, young universities, campuses	Global, by subjects, regions, young universities	Global, by subjects, disciplines
Frequency of the study	Annual	Annual	Annual

Source: Compiled from Academic Ranking of World Universities (2021), QS World University Rankings (n.d.), Times Higher Education World University Rankings (n.d.)

Each ranking has its own list of indicators for evaluation. The list of indicators depends on the features of the ranking, its focus. The indicators are combined into groups, each of the indicators has its own level of significance. The resulting indicators are added considering the weighting coefficient. The scores are normalized to a maximum value and reduced to a scale of one hundred points. Universities are then ranked according to the resulting score from highest to lowest. A higher education institution cannot influence its ranking since the information for ranking is obtained from external sources.

As an example, let us examine the top 10 universities in the QS ranking compared to the THE and ARWU rankings (Table 5).

Table 5 – Top 10 universities in the QS ranking compared to THE and ARWU rankings

University	QS	THE	ARWU
Massachusetts Institute of Technology (USA)	1	5	4
Stanford University (USA)	2	2	2
Harvard University (USA)	3	3	1
California Institute of Technology (USA)	4	4	9
Oxford University (UK)	5	1	7

Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (Switzerland)	6	14	21
Cambridge University (UK)	7	6	3
Imperial College London (UK)	8	11	25
University of Chicago (USA)	9	10	10
University College London (UK)	10	16	17

Source: Devised by the authors

Table 4 shows virtually identical rankings of the top 5 universities in the QS and THE rankings, with minor differences from the ARWU ranking.

As another example, consider the dynamics of the top twenty universities in the global QS ranking (Table 6).

Table 6 – Dynamics of universities in the QS ranking in 2021-2022

2021 ranking	University	2022 ranking	University
1	Massachusetts Institute of Technology (USA)	1	Massachusetts Institute of Technology (USA)
2	Stanford University (USA)	2	Oxford University (UK)
3	Harvard University (USA)	= 3	Cambridge University (UK)
4	California Institute of Technology (USA)	= 3	Stanford University (USA)
5	Oxford University (UK)	5	Harvard University (USA)
6	Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (Switzerland)	6	California Institute of Technology (USA)
7	Cambridge University (UK)	7	Imperial College London (UK)
8	Imperial College London (UK)	= 8	University College London (UK)
9	University of Chicago (USA)	= 8	Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (Switzerland)
10	University College London (UK)	10	University of Chicago (USA)
11	National University of Singapore (Singapore)	11	National University of Singapore (Singapore)
12	Princeton University (USA)	12	Nanyang Technological University (Singapore)
13	Nanyang Technological University (Singapore)	13	University of Pennsylvania (USA)
14	École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (Switzerland)	= 14	École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (Switzerland)
15	Tsinghua University (China)	= 14	Yale University (USA)
16	University of Pennsylvania (USA)	16	The University of Edinburgh (UK)
17	Yale University (USA)	17	Tsinghua University (China)
18	Cornell University (USA)	18	Peking University (China)
19	Columbia University (USA)	19	Columbia University (USA)
20	The University of Edinburgh (UK)	20	Princeton University (USA)

Source: Compiled from QS World University Rankings (n.d.)

Table 6 demonstrates that each of the universities shows a different dynamic.

Discussion

Given that in each country and, accordingly, in each national system of science and education, the level of competitiveness is contingent on certain factors in a unique way, the identification of these factors allows focusing on the areas of development that can create a competitive advantage for universities in the future (MARGINSON; VAN DER WENDE, 2007).

Regarding the influence of international rankings on university competitiveness, it should be noted that these rankings vary from one another (Tables 3 and 4). Thus, in assessing the competitiveness of higher educational institutions, researchers (DARAIO; BONACCORSI, 2017; PEREZ-ESPARRELLS; ORDUNA-MALEA, 2018) recommend taking into consideration the specifics of different rankings and their target audience. It is advisable to determine the general level of international competitiveness relying on several rankings since each of them evaluates different processes of the educational, scientific, methodical, and international activities of the university (ALTBACH, 2012). Furthermore, when studying the competitiveness of a higher education institution based on rankings, it is vital to consider the composition of indicators and the methodology behind each ranking (PEREZ-ESPARRELLS; ORDUNA-MALEA, 2018).

Scholars note (MARGINSON; VAN DER WENDE, 2007) that whereas in the first years since their creation, rankings primarily focused on assessing the research activities of universities, recently, attempts at finding universal indicators for assessing the quality of university education are becoming more and more prominent.

Fauzi *et al*. (2020) indicate that rankings typically rely on the criteria and indicators that can be easily measured and information about which is in open access. For instance, the parameters considered in the ARWU ranking (Academic Ranking of World Universities, 2021) are the number of Nobel Prize winners among the university's staff and alumni, the number of publications in the world's leading scientific journals, and the citation index of the staff. This suggests that the ranking actually evaluates the research potential of the university, which, however, indirectly reflects the quality of university education in the modern world. The THE (Times Higher Education World University Rankings, n.d.) and QS (QS World

University Rankings, n.d.) rankings, along with objective indicators, use subjective ones, in particular the assessment of a university's reputation in academia.

Naturally, any ranking system is based on a limited number of criteria, the choice of which is the prerogative of the ranking compilers. Researchers (DARAIO; BONACCORSI; SIMAR, 2015) note that preference given to the criteria that are easy to measure is the point that is easiest to criticize when making both rankings and classifications. Both approaches to comparison involve reducing complex and multidimensional reality to a limited number of criteria that define the place of an educational institution in a proposed system. In other words, we are dealing with a process of simplification. Therefore, the main task of ranking compilers is to base this simplification on the most important, fundamental criteria. This aspect is also pointed out in a study (ROTH; MCANDREW, 2018) arguing that any ranking system is conditioned by the aim the researchers set for themselves, and therefore relies on beliefs and values, according to which comparison and evaluation methods are formed. In this sense, all ranking systems reflect the realities of higher education incompletely (for example, successes in university research do not say anything about the state of business education or the teaching of special technical disciplines) and have a certain margin of error.

Although the indicators underlying the rankings differ, the basic principles of their construction are to some extent identical. Thus, comparing ARWU and THE, I. Hägg and L. Wedlin (2013) note that these rankings share common approaches despite the difference in the proposed indicators. Both rankings assess the university as a whole and use the hierarchical table principle, in which each university has a certain position signifying its status.

For this reason, the phenomenon of international university rankings should be considered purely functionally, i.e., analyzed in terms of those functions. Our main thesis is that rankings form a de facto hierarchy of the existing global educational space, legitimizing the dichotomous division of universities available in this space (in this context, we can use analogies with retail services (KARASHCHUK *et al*., 2019)) into the elite and the ordinary, or those that provide high-quality services (focused on participation in large-scale research projects) and those focused mainly on providing training that meets the minimum criteria for specialists.

Conclusion

The results of the study confirm the hypothesis that international rankings serve as a sophisticated tool for assessing the competitiveness of universities due to the recognition of the university in the global educational and scientific space.

To draw a summary, we can conclude on the importance of international university rankings as a tool for building academic hierarchies in the global educational space and assessing the quality of university education. Since the variability of approaches represented by the main indicators of rankings is undeniable, we can argue that different models of assessing the quality of university education de facto exist today and receive a legitimization model conditioned by the corresponding ranking.

What can be a prospect for future research is the analysis of Russian university rankings and their compliance with international standards for assessing the quality of higher education.

The limitations of the study are associated with the limited list of rankings analyzed.

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How to reference this article

EBZEEVA, Y.; DUBININA, N.; DUGALICH, N.; LEVSHITS, A.; NAKISBAEV, D. International rankings on the competitiveness of universities in global educational space. **Revista online de Política e Gestão Educacional**, Araraquara, v. 26, n. esp. 2, e022066, Mar. 2022. e-ISSN: 1519-9029. DOI: https://doi.org/10.22633/rpge.v26iesp.2.16564

Submitted: 03/11/2021
Required revisions: 28/12/2021
Approved: 19/02/2022
Published: 31/03/2022