

# The Impact of Global University Rankings on Higher Education Management and Policy in Kazakhstan

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the relevance of global ranking systems as a policy instrument of strategic planning, quality management and public accountability of higher education institutions (HEI) in Kazakhstan. Being one of the world's fastest growing economies, Kazakhstan has set priorities on developing a knowledge-based society for global competition. Celebrating its 20th anniversary of independence from the former Soviet Union, the nation has become the first of five Central-Asian countries to introduce its higher education institutions in global rankings. Yet, there is little empirical work or theoretical treatment of the influence of global rankings on the government's educational policy of Central Asian states. In addition, both the increasing impact of global and national rankings of HEIs in Kazakhstan and the government's decision to motivate local academic institutions to take top tiers in global ranking systems prompt us to better understand how higher education institutions respond to the rankings.

**Keyword:** Kazakhstan; Global Rankings; Higher Education

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## 1. Introduction

With the publication of the first national rankings system in the U.S. *U.S. News and World Report* (UNSWR) magazine in 1983 and the first global rankings *Academic World University Rankings* (ARWU) prepared by Shanghai Jiao Tong University in 2003, nowadays more than 50 countries have designed their national rankings systems. As a relatively new phenomenon in global higher education, rankings have quite a range of functions and purposes. Their functional scope differs from marketing and promoting academic institutions to incentivising institutional planning, enhancing internal data collection and benchmarking. One thing has become definite -- institutional rankings are here to stay and cannot be ignored in the global competitive world.

The growing influence of global rankings has developed controversial attitudes among university leaders, researchers as well as non-participant higher education stakeholders. Both proponents and critics have a good ground to debate on the ranking methodologies within the work of the *International Rankings Expert Group* (IREG) which integrates rankings experts from different countries whose mission is to monitor the quality of the rankings systems' methodologies based on the Berlin Principles on Rankings of Higher Education including validity, reliability and transparency. The critiques of the rankings include the preoccupation of the ranking agencies and policy organizations with institutional research performance rather than addressing the quality of teaching and learning. As Altbach (2006, p. 80) states, "rankings ignore key academic roles such as teaching and do not look at all how students are affected by their academic experience." Many critics would agree that the main weakness of rankings systems is not the results but the methodology process and its transparency. Using quantification as proxy for quality is in question.

The prominent example of the downside of the rankings in tertiary education is that rankings tend to rebalance research over teaching and place more emphasis on hard sciences and marginalise the humanities. The student selectivity for the sake of recruiting the formally qualified students with strong family traditions of education reduces admittance chances of low-income students (Clarke, 2007). One of the most recent critiques of global ranking systems is the lack of reference to a university entrant's socio-cultural context.

Despite the growing criticisms, the proponents and rankers themselves are adamant that rankings serve as a useful instrument of ‘consumer-type-information’ on the performance and quality of educational services for students, parents, faculty and employers. Institutions view rankings as an effective approach to branding and perhaps, more importantly, harnessing institutional reputation locally and globally. Stakeholders may use rankings for fundraising and sponsorship.

The impact of rankings on both governmental and institutional policies and strategies is getting its momentum. Salmi and Saroyan state that at the institutional level rankings could be used for strategic planning and quality improvement process while at the governmental level rankings are likely to stimulate a culture of quality (Salmi & Saroyan, 2007, p. 79). Indeed, many academic institutions across the world have started to develop their long-term institutional strategies and accountability mechanisms based on rankings indicators. The prime example is England where academic institutions are organising their internal data management more aligned with the external information requirements of the league table compilers (Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], 2008). The influence of institutional rankings in the U.K. has extended beyond the institutional level as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) utilised the rankings in order to allocate governmental funding and resources to academic institutions (Clarke, 2005).

Hazelkorn in her cross-national study, supported by OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), surveyed views of higher education leaders in 41 countries about the role of rankings and their impact on institutional policy and development (Hazelkorn, 2008, p. 195). According to Hazelkorn’s study, over 40% of respondents tend to develop long-term partnerships and international collaboration based on peer-benchmarking and the institution’s position in rankings. 57% of the respondents said that they thought rankings were influencing the willingness of other HEIs to partner with them (Hazelkorn, 2008, p. 198).

## **2. Kazakhstani Universities in Global Rankings**

Global league tables are considered as a necessary driver for stimulating competition across institutions on the national and trans-national scales.

Competition between higher education institutions is a relatively new phenomenon in most regions of the world including Central Asia. As Altbach points out, “competition has long been a part of a small number of academic systems, such as the United States and, to some extent Canada; but it is a new factor in most countries (Altbach, 2006, p. 78).” Nowadays, as global rankings bring a strong element of competition and an image of “a world-class university,” every university worldwide wishes to enter the top tier of some 10 different global ranking systems. In the socio-economic context of Kazakhstan, the general theme of competition is now regarded as the most important priority for the country’s future development as it is determined to become one of the top 50 competitive economies according to the Global Competitiveness Report published by the World Economic Forum. According to the special government statement *Strategy on entering top 50 competitive economies in the world* issued in 2006, the higher education sector should develop technology parks, research centres and incubators in close collaboration with the industry and international partners.

Progressive government reforms have prepared a solid grounding for the higher education system of Kazakhstan to compete internationally. Getting independence from the former Soviet Union in 1991 and having implemented intensive educational reforms, Kazakhstan has done great efforts to gear its higher education system towards the Western academic model over a relatively short period of time. The large-scale developments include the implementation of the three-tiered system of Bachelor’s, Master’s and Ph.D. degrees. In 2010 the country has officially become a part of the European Higher Education Area as a signatory to the Bologna Process. This has served as a good basis for launching joint international degree programmes especially on the postgraduate level. Following the governmental policy, academic institutions are developing international academic mobility schemes and applying for international accreditation of academic programmes. Nazarbayev University, the government’s ambitious initiative to create a brand-new research university, was officially opened in 2010 to be a globally competitive flagship of higher education.

Since rankings are likely to raise international visibility and reputation as well as to measure research capacity of an institution, the Ministry of Education

and Science initiated a systematic series of actions to encourage universities to take part in both national and international rankings systems. According to the national strategy of boosting socio-economic development of the country *Strategic Development Plan for Kazakhstan till 2020*, the government expects to see at least 2 universities enter the top-tier institutions in global rankings. Although it has not been yet officially stated which global rankings to apply for and which particular ranks to achieve, there is good reason to believe that higher education institutions are likely to develop their own indicator-responsive and internationally competitive strategies.

It is believed that rankings set standards and create an average image of a modern and competitive institution, as they all have an implicit ideal type on academic institution. As King points out, “the rankings do more than provide listings but are premised on a view of what higher education should be like as these are expressed in the criteria that the compilers operate (King, 2009, p. 141).” The ARWU is highly likely to serve as a system of internationally-recognised standards of a modern research-intensive university and favours well-established institutions. Other rankings as the QS World University Rankings prepared by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS-WUR) value reputation as they assign a large 40% to the global academic opinions and a reasonable 10% to the employer reputation of a ranked institution. Despite the implication that reputation is one of the controversial measures (Dill & Soo, 2005, p. 503), we believe that developing both national and international reputation is one of the priorities for both young and established universities on their way to international recognition.

Tertiary institutions of Kazakhstan have opportunities to gain their places in the “ranking game” on both national and international levels. In terms of global rankings, Kazakhstani universities have already claimed different tiers in the QS WUR and the Webometrics Ranking of World Universities prepared by Cybematics Lab CSIC. Some of the ambitious national-status universities are submitting their institutional data for participating in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE WUR). We take the view that not all global rankings systems can be relevant to post-Soviet Central-Asian universities. We believe that Kazakhstan’s institutions which have been traditionally locally-focused and just starting to claim their visibility on the global stage may gear their institutional strategies towards the indicators set by

the global rankings mentioned earlier -- QS WUR and the Webometrics Ranking of World Universities. The Shanghai rankings are not likely to be suitable for the Kazakhstani context with its exclusive research focus and a slow rate of volatility due to its tendency to privilege well-established and research-intensive institutions.

The appearance of two national universities in the 2010 QS World University Rankings, prepared by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS WUR), Gumilyov Eurasian National University in the top 451-450 and Al-Farabi Kazakh National University in the top 501-550 respectively, has immediately spurred media coverage about these universities' international achievements. Both ranked universities are comprehensive and regarded as flagship institutions of the nation. As the QS Intelligence Unit observes, these two Central Asian academic institutions are marked with their exceptional student faculty ratios and an emerging standing with international academics (Chau, 2011). The impact of the rankings on these two institutions' reputation has been enormous. It is interesting to observe that the positive side-effect of the global rankings has been a good start of national competition within higher education institutions. The two pioneer institutions' entry in the QS WUR has prompted other local institutions to take global rankings seriously.

To date, eight universities of Kazakhstan feature in the 2012 QS World University Rankings. Out of ninety four Asian universities in the top 500 of the 2012 QS WUR, there are two best-ranked universities of Kazakhstan representing Central Asia -- Al-Farabi Kazakh National University and Gumilyov Eurasian National University -- which have entered the QS WUR top 400. The five recent entrants -- Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University, Auezov South Kazakhstan State University, Buketov Karaganda State University, Satpayev Kazakh National Technical University, Seifullin Kazakh Agrotechnical University -- made the band of 601+ in the 2012 QS WUR while Kazakh-British Technical University made the band of 551-600. The average age of all the eight ranked institutions is 54. According to the QS WUR age classification of ranked universities, two Kazakhstani institutions are considered young, one university is established and the other five are of the mature-institution status.

Along with the QS WUR, the Webometrics Ranking of World Universities prepared by Cybematics Lab CSIC has also been widely accepted among

academic institutions of Kazakhstan. With the government statement of encouraging international collaboration and improving local scholars' engagement in international research projects, the institutions are now placing more emphasis on the website improvement for their global visibility. If only two institutions gained places among the top 5,000 institutions out of 20,000 institutions in the Webometrics Ranking of World Universities of July 2011, now the number of the institutions has grown to 9 in the new edition of the Webometrics Rankings of January 2012.

### **3. The Impact of Global Rankings on the Government's Higher Education Policy**

Kazakhstan's first experience in global rankings has had a positive influence on the institutional behavior of the academic institutions. In general, rankings have reinforced institutional motivation to enhance quality and to achieve a better ranking position and by so doing to claim their international presence globally. The relative success of Kazakhstan in the global rankings has primarily been perceived as an instrument for developing both local and international reputation. The ranked institutions placed their news on national and private news websites as well as in official presentations and local newspapers. This observation of institutional behavior towards global rankings is in line with what Hazelkorn (2008) has found in her cross-national survey of university leaders which states that almost 50% respondents use the rankings for marketing purposes, including spreading "good news" of their universities' top ranks in the media. Considering the fact that transnational rankings have become a global phenomenon only about two decades ago, the ranked universities' achievements have been impressive for Kazakhstan as an emerging market-based economy. In fact, this could be relevant to all post-Soviet economies which have been somewhat isolated and now set their aims to internationalise their both long-established and young academic institutions and develop their own institutional identities.

The research on rankings has proved that many university senior managers consider indicators as standards and beacons for their strategic planning processes (Clarke, 2005; Hazelkorn, 2008; HEFCE, 2008). It is now becoming certain that rankings are also used as a "policy instrument" to underpin

and quicken the pace of higher education reforms (Hazelkorn, 2011). More importantly, in the context of post-Soviet academic institutions within which accountability mechanisms and data collection systems have not been considered as part of institutional policy geared towards internationalisation, global rankings could rectify such omissions. In order to steer institutional and faculty behavior, most higher education institutions of Kazakhstan have stated their ambitions to enter world university rankings as key goals in the institutional strategic plans. The prime feature of this institutional behavior in Kazakhstan is the decision on the part of some academic institutions to establish special departments which will be in charge of promoting their positions in the global rankings. Al-Farabi Kazakh National University and Gumilyov Eurasian National University could serve as a good example of such practices.

The academic institutions' aspirations to enter top positions in the global rankings fit well with Kazakhstan's governmental policy in the higher education sector. Along with the consistency of the rankings methodologies of QS WUR, THE WUR, Webometrics Rankings, the *Government Programme for the Development of Education 2011-2020* enhances the higher education institutions' vision and understanding of what to strive for and achieve in the future in order to be internationally competitive. Therefore, academic institutions intending to use rankings as an instrument for benchmarking against their international peers can no longer have slow and incremental improvement. The foremost point is the Ministry's new classification of higher education institutions which in its turn leads the institutions to stratification with reforming some universities into research-intensive institutions. This fits well with the global rankings which mostly follow the characteristics of a research-oriented university (Altbach, 2006, p. 79). Taking this strategic step, the Ministry has also decided to grant institutional autonomy to higher education institutions, starting from national universities and encouraging them to develop their public accountability mechanisms. From the accountability perspective, institutions involved in global rankings are likely to develop their own indicator systems and scorecards to measure their research productivity as well as international publication and dissemination of the research outcomes.

Related to the previous point is the procedural part of the institutional application for the global rankings. As the institutions are likely to collect their



data in line with the global ranking indicators (QS WUR, THE WUR), there is a growing pressure on all higher education institutions in Kazakhstan for accurate data management and transparency. If the indicator of student and alumni satisfaction is to gain greater importance when measuring the quality of the teaching-and-learning process, the transparency of institutional statistics needs to be monitored very carefully. More substantively, the Ministry sees the issue of institutional data collection alarming, as the higher education statistics does not meet international standards. The improvement of this situation at academic institutions has been planned for the next ten years of the governmental policy.

The Ministry's encouragement of the university faculty to publish scholarly papers in internationally reputed, high-impact journals is one of the indicator-responsive points raised on the governmental level. The Ministry has taken a role of measuring the research productivity of institutions. The ministerial decree has been issued and distributed among institutions intended to monitor the university faculty's publications in high-impact journals. From 2011 onwards, every academic institution will have to report about the faculty members' publication lists at highly-cited journals to the Ministry. The faculty are likely to be held accountable for the research capacity of their institution, as global rankings rely heavily on bibliometric and citation data. To initialise this great endeavour of publishing internationally, institutions run English language courses for their faculty in order to assist them to start publishing internationally. Moreover, in order for the faculty to explore current global developments in their professional fields, the Ministry has recently granted all the higher education institutions with the free access to the resources of Thomson Reuters and Springer agencies.

Another important point is the Ministry's close attention to promoting international academic mobility especially on the postgraduate level and the recruitment of international faculty. The government allocates funding for both sending local "outbound students" abroad and receiving international exchange "inbound students." Also, the Ministry provides funding to national universities which have Ph.D. programmes for recruiting international Ph.D. advisors as well as sending Kazakhstan's doctoral candidates to hosting international-recognised institutions for Ph.D. research attachment experiences. These developments are in parallel with the two key indicators in QS WUR and THE WUR which are a proxy of progress in the internationalisation of higher education -- international student ratio and international faculty ratio.

Global rankings as a system of evaluation, international benchmarking and quality management have spurred great interest as well as institutional competition within Kazakhstan. Just like other regions of Asia, Central Asia aims to have top-ranking universities. Stepping out of the former Soviet Union's shadow, local universities are planning to claim their presence globally. As Altbach points out, "it is in fact a good thing that universities outside the traditional powerhouses of North America and western Europe are improving and gaining increased recognition for their work (Altbach, 2010, p. 3)." Yet the presence of Central Asian tertiary institutions in global rankings is not that strongly felt compared to that of academic institutions based in East Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia. Due to the recent educational reforms and the consequences of the legacy of the post-Soviet 'command-and-control' styled structure of higher education management, the educational leaders will have to deal with the evident gap between their ambitions and the reality.

On the one hand, there is good reason to believe that tertiary institutions of Kazakhstan should behave ambitiously and strive for further advancement in the global rankings. On the other hand, these institutions are highly likely to face challenges in competing with their international peers in global rankings. A strong need to link academia, research and industry, a more systematic approach to developing international academic mobility, a need in increasing the number of English-medium academic programmes and creating better conditions for the faculty members to engage in research are all high priorities for Kazakhstan's universities aiming to reach a top rank. As the phenomenon of global rankings is getting more and more popular in Central Asia, higher education leaders are likely to understand that rankings should not be an end in themselves as they could be effectively used as an accountability and transparency instrument contributing to institutional improvement and organisational changes towards global higher education standards.

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