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QS World Ranking of Universities: Perspectives and Challenges

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Abstract

The QS World University Rankings have become one of the most visible and influential global league tables in higher education. They are used by students making study choices, by universities benchmarking performance, by employers interpreting institutional prestige, and by governments and policymakers seeking simplified signals of competitiveness and reputation. The ranking's appeal lies in its apparent ability to compress the complexity of universities into a single comparative framework. At the same time, its prominence has generated persistent debate over what exactly it measures, which institutional missions it privileges, and whether its indicators offer a valid representation of educational quality.

This paper examines the QS World University Rankings through two lenses: perspectives and challenges. It begins by outlining the current criteria, indicators, and weightages used in the latest methodology. It then explains the ranking methodology, including the role of global surveys, Scopus-based bibliometrics, institutional data submissions, and eligibility and inclusion rules. The discussion proceeds to evaluate the constructive perspectives associated with QS rankings, such as their utility for international students, comparative benchmarking, employability signaling, research visibility, and sustainability awareness.

The QS World University Rankings can be useful when interpreted as one analytical tool among many rather than as a definitive measure of university quality. Their greatest value lies in showing patterns of visibility, reputation, research strength, and international engagement.

Key words QS Ranking: Perspectives, Challenges.

Introduction

Global university rankings emerged as a defining feature of the twenty-first-century higher education landscape. They responded to a world in which cross-border student mobility, intensified research competition, and the internationalization of higher education increased demand for simple, comparative information about universities. Among the major ranking systems, the QS World University Rankings occupy a particularly prominent place. The ranking is widely recognized across continents, heavily cited in institutional publicity, and frequently consulted by prospective students and parents. According to QS's own support documentation, the ranking draws on millions of academic papers and large-scale surveys of academics and employers, and it is presented as a broad evaluation of student experience, partnerships, research activity, and faculty-related characteristics.

The influence of QS rankings extends well beyond student choice. Universities use them for strategic planning, international branding, partnership development, and internal benchmarking. Governments and ministries may reference ranking performance in policy debates about national competitiveness and talent attraction. Employers, though often selectively, may use league-table visibility as a shorthand proxy for institutional status. The ranking therefore functions not only as a description of

university standing but also as a force that shapes institutional behavior and public perception. In the case of QS, research reputation, citations, and employer recognition occupy a large share of the total score, while dimensions such as teaching quality, inclusion, regional mission, and community engagement remain only partially represented or absent.

The latest methodology illustrates both continuity and adaptation. QS continues to center research and reputation, but it has also introduced or expanded attention to employment outcomes, international research networks, and sustainability. These developments suggest that rankings are not static; they evolve in response to criticism, market demand, and changes in what stakeholders expect universities to demonstrate.

This research document addresses those questions by analyzing the QS World University Rankings under the theme of “perspectives and challenges.” It first explains the criteria and indicator weights in the current framework. It then reviews how the methodology operates in practice. On that basis, it evaluates the perspectives that make QS rankings attractive and influential, followed by the challenges that complicate their interpretation and use. The central argument is that QS rankings are informative, but only if their methodological assumptions, scope, and limits are understood clearly.

Criteria, Indicators and Weightages

The current QS World University Rankings methodology organizes indicators into broad thematic “lenses.” This design communicates the idea that universities should be evaluated through multiple dimensions rather than a single statistic. In the latest methodology, Research and Discovery accounts for 50 percent of the total score; Employability and Outcomes accounts for 20 percent; Global Engagement accounts for 15 percent; Learning Experience accounts for 10 percent; and Sustainability accounts for 5 percent.

Table 1. Current QS World University Rankings indicators and weights

Lens	Indicator	Weight
Research and Discovery	Academic Reputation	30%
Research and Discovery	Citations per Faculty	20%
Employability and Outcomes	Employer Reputation	15%
Employability and Outcomes	Employment Outcomes	5%
Learning Experience	Faculty Student Ratio	10%
Global Engagement	International Faculty Ratio	5%
Global Engagement	International Research Network	5%
Global Engagement	International Student Ratio	5%
Global Engagement	International Student Diversity	0%
Sustainability	Sustainability	5%

At the indicator level, Academic Reputation carries the greatest individual weight at 30 percent. This reflects QS’s longstanding assumption that the views of academics around the world provide an important signal of institutional quality and research standing. Citations per Faculty, weighted at 20

percent, measures research influence relative to institutional size. Employer Reputation contributes 15 percent and is intended to capture how employers view graduates from particular institutions. Employment Outcomes contributes 5 percent and reflects graduate success and employer connections in a more direct way than simple reputation does.

The Learning Experience lens is represented primarily by Faculty Student Ratio, weighted at 10 percent. This indicator is intended to act as a proxy for teaching capacity, supervision, and student support. In the Global Engagement lens, International Faculty Ratio, International Research Network, and International Student Ratio each carry 5 percent. Together, they aim to show how internationally connected and globally attractive an institution is in terms of staffing, collaboration, and student composition. The Sustainability indicator, weighted at 5 percent, introduces environmental, social, and governance considerations into the ranking and signals growing interest in universities' wider societal responsibilities.

QS also references International Student Diversity in its methodology materials, but on the current methodology page this indicator is assigned a 0 percent weighting. Its presence is still conceptually relevant because it shows an effort to move beyond counting international students toward considering the breadth of their national backgrounds. However, because the current weight is zero, it does not affect overall rank in practice.

The weighting structure reveals the ranking's priorities. Half of the total score is concentrated in research visibility and academic standing, while another fifth is tied to employability. This means that 70 percent of the score is fundamentally linked to external reputation and research-related influence. By contrast, the direct proxy most associated with teaching conditions, Faculty Student Ratio, has only a 10 percent weight. Sustainability and certain dimensions of international diversity have comparatively modest or no effective influence. The architecture of the ranking therefore communicates a particular definition of excellence: one grounded in reputation, research influence, graduate signaling, and international profile.

The weightage structure matters because it explains why universities may rise or fall in ways that do not correspond neatly to popular assumptions about educational quality. A university with strong local teaching performance but weak global brand recognition may remain lower than a globally famous research institution. Conversely, a university can strengthen specific indicators without immediately moving up in headline rank because QS scores are normalized comparatively across a large and increasingly competitive global field. Understanding indicator weights is therefore essential to interpreting both the utility and the limits of the ranking.

Methodology

The QS World University Rankings combine survey-based measures, bibliometric data, and institutionally reported statistics. Methodologically, the ranking seeks to create a global comparative framework by standardizing multiple indicators and then aggregating them into a single overall score. The process begins with data collection. According to QS support documentation for the current cycle, research begins in September and publication occurs in June. The system incorporates millions of academic papers and very large survey pools, including more than 151,000 academics and 100,000 employers. Institutional data submissions are also collected during the cycle, alongside sustainability-related data.

The reputation indicators are central to the methodology. Academic Reputation is derived from QS's global academic survey, through which academics nominate institutions they regard highly in their fields. Employer Reputation is based on a separate employer survey that seeks views on institutions producing strong graduates. These indicators are influential because they carry a combined weight of 45 percent. Their defenders argue that expert and employer judgments add an important qualitative dimension that pure metrics cannot capture. Their critics counter that such surveys are inherently perception-based and vulnerable to visibility effects, brand inertia, and regional imbalances in response patterns.

Citations per Faculty is the key bibliometric indicator. QS uses citation data associated with published research and divides total citation counts by faculty size in order to adjust, at least partially, for institutional scale. This is intended to distinguish highly influential research output from simple publication volume. The indicator relies on a large publication database and normalization procedures that have attracted close scholarly scrutiny. Comparative studies have suggested that QS's citation measure does not always align strongly with other citation-based ranking indicators, indicating that methodological choices in normalization and field treatment can significantly affect outcomes.

The ratio-based indicators, such as Faculty Student Ratio, International Faculty Ratio, and International Student Ratio, depend on institutional reporting and definitional consistency. Faculty Student Ratio is meant to proxy the resources available for teaching, supervision, and student support, while international staff and student ratios capture aspects of global appeal and diversity. International Research Network measures the success of institutions in sustaining collaborative research partnerships across locations. QS defines sustained partnerships as those resulting in three or more joint papers over a five-year period. This criterion attempts to distinguish enduring international collaboration from isolated co-authorship.

The methodology also includes Employment Outcomes and Sustainability. Employment Outcomes extends the ranking beyond employer reputation by considering evidence of graduate success and links between institutions and employment pathways. Sustainability assesses university performance across environmental, social, and governance dimensions and includes attention to institutional impact related to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. This reflects a broader movement within higher education evaluation toward societal responsibility and not merely academic prestige.

Eligibility and inclusion rules form another important part of the methodology. To be eligible, an institution must offer full-degree programs at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, provide programs in at least two faculty areas, and meet additional subject and graduation-history requirements. To be included, an institution must satisfy thresholds such as strong academic reputation placement, a minimum volume of Scopus-indexed publications over a five-year period, or relevant regional-ranking performance. Small institutions face additional requirements tied to top positions in key reputation or citation indicators.

A further methodological point concerns interpretation. QS has explained that rankings movement should not be read only through headline position. Because the system is comparative and normalized across global distributions of performance, an institution may improve in raw or indicator-level terms yet fall in rank if peer institutions improve faster. This makes the ranking more

dynamic but also more difficult to interpret casually. The methodology is therefore not just a technical system for producing scores; it is a framework that actively shapes how progress, competition, and excellence are understood in a globalized higher education market.

Perspectives

- One important perspective on the QS World University Rankings is that they answer a genuine informational need. For international students facing thousands of institutions across countries, languages, and regulatory systems, a global ranking offers a manageable starting point. Even if it cannot capture every dimension of quality, it provides a recognizable map of institutional visibility and comparative standing. QS is especially influential because it combines research signals with employability and internationalization indicators, which align closely with what many globally mobile students seek: recognizable reputation, career opportunities, and access to international networks.
- A second perspective is institutional benchmarking. Universities operate in increasingly competitive environments and need tools to compare themselves with peers. QS offers indicator-level data that can reveal strengths and weaknesses in academic reputation, employer perception, research influence, sustainability, and global engagement. QS's own commentary on ranking movement emphasizes that long-term indicator trends and peer-group comparisons often provide more insight than annual headline rank. Used in this way, the ranking can help universities identify where improvement is occurring and where strategic gaps remain.
- Third, the QS framework reflects the growing centrality of employability in higher education. By including Employer Reputation and Employment Outcomes, QS recognizes that many students and families judge universities partly by career prospects. This is not a trivial concern. In systems where higher education is increasingly expensive and internationally mobile students make substantial financial commitments, graduate outcomes matter. The ranking's employability lens therefore speaks to a practical dimension of institutional performance that purely research-based tables often understate.
- Fourth, the ranking captures aspects of global engagement that are important in a networked academic world. International faculty, international students, and international research collaboration can enrich the educational environment, foster cross-border knowledge exchange, and strengthen the reputation of institutions as global actors. For universities pursuing internationalization strategies, these indicators reward efforts to build transnational partnerships and attract globally diverse talent.
- Fifth, the introduction of sustainability adds a broader societal perspective. Rankings have often been criticized for reducing universities to research productivity and prestige. By incorporating sustainability, QS signals that environmental stewardship, social responsibility, governance, and contributions to sustainable development should form part of institutional evaluation. Although the 5 percent weighting is modest, its symbolic importance is significant because it indicates that the concept of excellence is expanding.
- Rankings can push institutions to improve data systems, become more internationally connected, and think strategically about research collaboration and external perception. They can also make universities more attentive to how they communicate their strengths to global audiences.

- A strong QS position may help a university attract partnerships, faculty, donors, and students. In settings where institutional prestige matters for mobility, scholarships, or global branding, a visible ranking presence can create real advantages.
- The key positive perspective, therefore, is not that QS provides a final truth about quality, but that it offers a common international reference point. Its usefulness is greatest when users understand that it measures a particular model of globally visible university performance rather than the totality of what a university is or should be.

Challenges

- The most frequently cited challenge to the QS World University Rankings is their heavy reliance on reputation. Academic Reputation and Employer Reputation together account for 45 percent of the total score. This means almost half of the ranking depends on perception-based surveys rather than directly observed educational processes or student learning. Critics argue that reputation tends to reward historical prestige, linguistic visibility, and brand familiarity. Once institutions become globally famous, they may continue to benefit from reputational momentum, making it difficult for newer or regionally focused universities to gain comparable recognition.
- A second challenge concerns structural bias toward large, research-intensive, and comprehensive institutions. Recent analysis of the 2025 QS rankings using Australian university data found that overall scores correlate very strongly with academic and employer reputation and that larger universities tend to perform better. Smaller or specialized institutions may provide excellent teaching, regional service, or professional education but still struggle in a system where reputation, publication visibility, and scale matter heavily. This raises a basic fairness issue: the ranking may compare institutions with very different missions as if they were competing in the same race on neutral terrain.
- Third, the ranking remains limited in its capture of teaching and learning quality. Faculty Student Ratio is the main proxy for learning experience. A lower student-to-faculty ratio does not automatically mean better pedagogy, stronger curriculum design, more inclusive assessment, or superior student support. At the same time, EUA and other analysts have stressed that rankings in general often lack robust indicators for learning and teaching. When users interpret QS as a measure of overall educational quality, they may overstate what the methodology can actually demonstrate.
- Fourth, Although QS publishes substantial methodological information, independent studies have raised questions about normalization choices, survey weighting, and the relationship between QS citation indicators and other bibliometric measures. Comparative analyses have suggested that QS's citation measure correlates only weakly with some other citation-based indicators, implying that ranking outputs can depend significantly on technical design decisions.
- Fifth, the ranking may create incentives for strategic behavior or gaming. Reviews of university rankings have argued that when survey visibility matters, institutions may devote resources to branding and marketing in order to influence reputation more than underlying quality. Indicators such as student-staff ratios can also be susceptible to definitional manipulation or short-term managerial adjustment. More broadly, the presence of rankings can encourage universities to invest in metrics that are rewarded publicly while

underinvesting in less visible but socially valuable activities such as community engagement, staff well-being, access initiatives, or locally relevant teaching missions.

- Sixth, there are regional, disciplinary, and cultural distortions. That ranking methodologies often favor historically renowned universities in Anglo-Saxon and North American contexts and institutions with strong profiles in the natural sciences. Universities with missions oriented toward local language instruction, regional inclusion, professional education, or the arts and humanities may be disadvantaged. Internationalization indicators can also reflect external conditions, such as geography, migration regimes, language dominance, or public funding structures, rather than purely institutional quality.
- Seventh, rankings can be misused in high-impact decisions. EUA has warned that rankings should not be used hastily for decisions involving quality recognition, policy allocation, or institutional judgment. Yet in practice, ranking outcomes may influence funding formulas, immigration routes, recognition decisions, or public narratives of success and failure. This is problematic because the ranking was not designed to serve as a comprehensive quality assurance tool. A fall in rank may trigger reputational damage even when underlying institutional performance remains stable or improves modestly.

Conclusion

The QS World University Rankings are best understood as a powerful but partial instrument. Their power comes from visibility, comparability, and the capacity to translate complex institutional realities into a form that global audiences can quickly recognize. Their partiality comes from the specific conception of excellence built into their indicators and weights. QS prioritizes reputation, research influence, employability signaling, international engagement, and, increasingly, sustainability. These are important dimensions of university performance, but they do not exhaust the missions of higher education.

From one perspective, QS rankings provide useful orientation for students, benchmarking value for institutions, and broad signals for employers and policymakers. From another, they risk privileging historical prestige, scale, and research visibility at the expense of teaching quality, equity, community impact, and mission diversity. The challenge, therefore, is not simply whether the ranking is “good” or “bad,” but how responsibly it is interpreted and used.

In that broader evidence ecosystem, the QS World University Rankings remain relevant and useful. Outside that context, they are too easily mistaken for a complete measure of university excellence.

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