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## **GLOBAL UNIVERSITY RANKINGS AND NIGERIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: IMPLICATIONS, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES**

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### **Abstract**

*Globalisation has reshaped higher education, with global university rankings becoming a key benchmark of institutional quality. This paper examined the impact and implications of these rankings for Nigerian universities. While rankings can promote research excellence, international collaboration, and global visibility, they also reinforce Western dominance, marginalise teaching quality, and neglect community engagement. Nigerian universities face persistent challenges, including poor funding, inadequate infrastructure, weak ICT capacity, and brain drain, which limited their competitiveness. The study recommended strategic investment in research infrastructure, technology, and human resources, alongside international partnerships and stronger quality assurance mechanisms. Addressing these issues will enable Nigerian universities to improve their standing, while maintaining their commitment to national development.*

**Keywords:** Global university rankings, Nigerian universities, Higher education, Global competitiveness, Internationalisation

### **Introduction**

Globalisation and advances in information and communication technology have transformed higher education across the world, creating new opportunities for collaboration and competition. A central feature of this transformation has been the rise of global university

rankings, introduced in the early 2000s, which have become a widely accepted benchmark of institutional reputation and quality (Soh, 2015). Rankings are often presented as tools for transparency, accountability, and institutional improvement (Aina, 2017). They influence student choice, policy direction, and funding priorities, while also serving as a source of international recognition for universities.

Despite these perceived benefits, global university rankings have been criticised for their methodological weaknesses, cultural bias, and overemphasis on research output, often at the expense of teaching quality, social responsibility, and community engagement (Balogun, 2018; Hazelkorn, 2015). These concerns are particularly relevant in Nigeria, where universities face structural and systemic challenges that hinder their global competitiveness.

The 2024 Times Higher Education World University Rankings, for example, did not feature any Nigerian university among the top 1000 globally (Times Higher Education, 2022). This exclusion has raised serious concerns about the competitiveness of Nigerian higher education and its ability to contribute to national development and global knowledge production. Issues such as underfunding, inadequate research infrastructure, weak ICT systems, poor internationalisation, and persistent brain drain continue to weaken institutional performance (Osagie, 2020).

While Nigerian universities have made attempts to improve their global profile through increased research activity, staff training, and international partnerships, progress has been slow. Some scholars argue that global rankings can serve as a catalyst for improvement by encouraging excellence and innovation (Aina, 2017), while others caution that the pursuit of higher rankings risks diverting attention away from core responsibilities such as teaching, community service, and national development (Hazelkorn, 2015).

This paper therefore explores the implications of global university rankings for Nigerian higher education. It examines their potential benefits and drawbacks, identifies the challenges Nigerian universities face in competing globally, and suggests strategies that can enable these institutions to enhance their competitiveness without losing sight of their national mission.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

Global university rankings refer to comparative evaluations of higher education institutions across different countries, based on indicators such as research output, citations, faculty-to-student ratios, and international reputation (Usher & Savino, 2007). The most influential systems include the Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE), QS World University Rankings (QS), and the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU). While each ranking system uses different methodologies, they generally prioritise research performance and international visibility over teaching quality and community engagement (Hazelkorn, 2011; Marginson, 2014).

Competitiveness in higher education refers to the ability of universities to attract students, faculty, funding, and recognition at both national and global levels. Rankings are often seen as measures of competitiveness because they shape perceptions of institutional quality and reputation (Knight, 2007).

Internationalisation is the integration of international dimensions—such as student and staff mobility, cross-border research collaboration, and globally oriented curricula—into the teaching, research, and service functions of universities (Altbach, 2013). For institutions in developing countries, including Nigeria, internationalisation is often pursued as a strategy for improving global visibility and ranking performance.

### **Empirical Perspectives**

Several studies highlighted the positive contributions of global rankings. They promote transparency by providing comparative performance data (Hazelkorn, 2011), stimulate competition among universities, and enhance institutional reputation (Saisana & Saltelli, 2010). Rankings also serve as decision-making tools for students (Usher & Savino, 2007) and encourage international collaboration through joint research, faculty exchange, and student mobility (Altbach, 2013).

However, critics point out that rankings are methodologically limited and biased towards research-intensive, Western institutions. They often neglect the contextual missions of universities in developing countries (Marginson, 2014). Ordorika and Lloyd (2015) argue that rankings undervalue teaching quality, while Hazelkorn (2015) notes that some institutions engage in “gaming behaviours” such as data manipulation to improve their positions.

In Africa, Nigerian universities consistently underperform in global rankings due to underfunding, inadequate research infrastructure, and weak internationalisation strategies (Osagie, 2020). This contrasts with private universities such as Covenant University, which have improved visibility by investing in ICT resources and targeted research.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study draws on the world-class university model (Salmi, 2009), which identifies three essential factors for global competitiveness:

1. Concentration of talent (qualified faculty, researchers, and students);
2. Abundant resources (adequate funding and research infrastructure); and
3. Favourable governance structures (autonomy, transparency, and accountability).

Applying this model to Nigeria reveals significant gaps. Brain drain undermines the concentration of talent, limited government investment constrains resources, and corruption weakens governance. These systemic deficiencies explain why Nigerian universities struggle to achieve global competitiveness and visibility.

### **Conceptual Approach**

This paper is conceptual and theoretical in nature. It does not employ empirical methods such as surveys, interviews, or experiments. Rather, it is based on a critical review of existing literature, policy reports, and global university ranking frameworks. The study applies Salmi's (2009) world-class university model to examine how Nigerian universities perform in relation to the key elements of talent, resources, and governance. By synthesising conceptual perspectives and empirical evidence from Nigeria and other contexts, the paper offers insights into the implications of global rankings for Nigerian higher education and provides policy-oriented recommendations for improvement.

### **Challenges Facing Nigerian Universities in Global Rankings**

Despite reforms and efforts at institutional improvement, Nigerian universities continue to perform poorly in global rankings. Several interrelated challenges account for this situation:

#### **1. Inadequate Funding**

Government spending on higher education in Nigeria consistently falls below the UNESCO benchmark. This chronic underfunding results in outdated infrastructure, poorly equipped laboratories, limited research grants, and insufficient staff training opportunities. Without sustainable investment, Nigerian universities struggle to compete with their global counterparts (Aina, 2017).

#### **2. Brain Drain**

The migration of highly skilled academics and researchers to better-funded institutions abroad has significantly weakened Nigeria's academic workforce. Between 2017 and 2022, nearly 100,000 Nigerian students enrolled in UK universities, while many lecturers and researchers also relocated for improved pay and facilities (Premium Times, 2022). This exodus reduces research productivity and global visibility (Altbach, 2013).

#### **3. Weak ICT and Digital Infrastructure**

Many Nigerian universities operate with outdated equipment, unreliable internet access, and limited digital libraries. In today's knowledge-driven economy, where online visibility and access to international research networks are essential, such deficiencies place Nigerian institutions at a serious disadvantage (Osagie, 2020).

#### **4. Corruption and Governance Issues**

Poor governance, financial mismanagement, and bureaucratic inefficiencies weaken institutional credibility. Funds intended for research and infrastructure are often misappropriated, undermining accountability and institutional performance (Akinbode & Adesina, 2024).

**5. Neglect of Teaching and Community Engagement**

The focus on research outputs for global rankings often leads to neglect of teaching quality and community service. These functions, which are crucial for national development, are rarely captured by international ranking methodologies (Hazelkorn, 2015).

**6. Poor Internationalisation**

Nigerian universities attract relatively few international students and faculty, due to security concerns, poor facilities, and weak international linkages. This negatively affects their global reputation, which is a major criterion in ranking systems (Kehm, 2014).

**Opportunities of Global University Rankings for Nigerian Universities**

Although Nigerian universities currently perform poorly in global rankings, these systems also provide several opportunities that, if harnessed, can improve institutional quality and competitiveness.

**1. Benchmarking and Quality Improvement**

Global rankings offer universities measurable indicators of performance. By studying their positions and comparing themselves with better-ranked institutions, Nigerian universities can identify gaps in research output, faculty development, and internationalisation. These benchmarks can serve as tools for internal reforms, curriculum improvement, and adoption of global best practices (Hazelkorn, 2011). For instance, Covenant University has leveraged ranking metrics to enhance its research output and digital resources.

**2. Enhanced Visibility and Reputation**

A place in global rankings, even at modest levels, provides international visibility and credibility. For Nigerian universities, this visibility can attract foreign students, visiting scholars, and external funding. Improved reputation can also enhance alumni pride and stimulate donations and endowments, further boosting institutional capacity (Saisana & Saltelli, 2010).

**3. Promotion of Research Excellence**

Rankings reward high-quality publications, citations, and academic influence. This creates incentives for Nigerian academics to publish in

reputable journals and engage in innovative research. Over time, this emphasis on scholarly productivity can help reposition Nigerian universities as active contributors to global knowledge production (Altbach, 2013).

#### **4. International Collaboration and Partnerships**

Higher-ranked institutions are more likely to attract international collaborators. Nigerian universities can use global rankings as a platform to develop joint research projects, exchange programmes, and dual-degree arrangements. Such partnerships not only improve institutional visibility but also transfer knowledge, strengthen capacity, and enrich the student experience (Knight, 2007).

#### **5. Attraction of Students and Staff**

Improved ranking performance enhances a university's ability to attract international students and highly qualified faculty. This promotes diversity, creates cross-cultural learning environments, and strengthens institutional competitiveness. Even within Nigeria, students increasingly use rankings to guide their choices, meaning higher-ranked universities can attract top local talent as well.

#### **6. Policy Reforms and Accountability**

Global rankings put pressure on governments and universities to prioritise quality and accountability. Policymakers are more likely to introduce reforms in funding allocation, accreditation, and performance monitoring when institutions are visibly underperforming in global comparison (Hazelkorn, 2015). Rankings therefore act as external accountability tools that can stimulate governance reforms.

#### **7. Economic and Developmental Benefits**

Improved university rankings have broader socio-economic benefits. They can boost a country's knowledge economy, attract foreign direct investment in education, and contribute to national branding. Countries like South Africa have benefited from having institutions in global rankings, which strengthens their role as regional educational hubs. Nigeria can tap into similar opportunities by investing strategically in higher education.

**8. Encouragement of Innovation and ICT Adoption**

Because global rankings emphasise research visibility and technological readiness, they encourage universities to adopt ICT-driven solutions such as e-libraries, online learning platforms, and digital repositories. This shift can modernise Nigerian higher education and make it more relevant in the digital era.

**Implications of Global University Rankings for Nigerian Universities**

The growing influence of global university rankings carries significant implications for Nigerian higher education. These implications can be observed at multiple levels:

**1. Policy Implications**

The continued exclusion of Nigerian universities from the top tiers of global rankings puts pressure on government to reform higher education policies. Increased investment in research, infrastructure, and human capital becomes essential if Nigeria is to compete globally. At the same time, policymakers must balance ranking aspirations with the need to make higher education accessible and relevant to national development.

**2. Institutional Implications**

For universities, rankings act as external accountability measures. Institutions are compelled to align with global best practices in research, governance, and internationalisation. This creates opportunities for institutional reform but may also risk diverting attention away from local missions such as community engagement and nation-building.

**3. Academic Implications**

Faculty members face increasing pressure to publish in international journals, attract research grants, and collaborate globally. While this can improve scholarly productivity, it may also undermine teaching quality and increase workload stress. Academic career progression is becoming more closely tied to research visibility rather than holistic contributions.

#### **4. Student Implications**

Rankings shape students' choices and perceptions of quality. Many Nigerian students increasingly prefer to study abroad in higher-ranked institutions, contributing to capital flight and "brain drain." Conversely, if Nigerian universities improve their ranking performance, they may attract both domestic and international students, reducing outward migration.

#### **5. National Development Implications**

Higher education plays a vital role in producing the skilled workforce needed for national development. Poor ranking performance limits Nigeria's global competitiveness and its ability to participate effectively in the knowledge economy. On the other hand, strategic improvements in ranking-related indicators can strengthen the nation's human capital, innovation system, and socio-economic progress.

#### **Conclusion**

This paper examined the impact and implications of global university rankings on Nigerian higher education. Drawing on literature, policy reports, and Salmi's world-class university model, the study highlighted both the opportunities and challenges presented by global rankings. While such rankings can serve as benchmarks for quality assurance, institutional reform, and global recognition, they also reinforce existing inequalities by privileging well-funded Western institutions and neglecting local missions such as community engagement and teaching quality.

The analysis revealed that Nigerian universities continue to underperform in global rankings due to structural and systemic challenges. These include inadequate funding, persistent brain drain, weak ICT infrastructure, poor internationalisation, and governance weaknesses. Unless these issues are addressed, Nigerian institutions will remain at the margins of global higher education and unable to fully contribute to the knowledge economy.

At the same time, global rankings present significant opportunities. They can encourage Nigerian universities to adopt best practices, strengthen research output, build international collaborations, and improve visibility. Furthermore, improved performance in rankings can boost institutional reputation, attract top talent, and stimulate socio-

economic benefits by positioning Nigeria as a regional hub for higher education.

To translate these opportunities into sustainable progress, Nigerian universities must pursue strategic reforms. This includes increasing investment in research and infrastructure, enhancing internationalisation, promoting accountability, and aligning teaching and curricula with labour market needs. Most importantly, ranking ambitions should not override the social mission of universities: to provide accessible education, support national development, and empower communities.

In conclusion, global rankings should be regarded as instruments for improvement rather than ultimate goals. Nigerian universities will achieve lasting competitiveness when they integrate global standards with local priorities, balancing international recognition with their responsibility to national development. If properly managed, the pursuit of ranking excellence can become a catalyst for transformation, positioning Nigerian higher education as a driver of innovation and a contributor to global knowledge.

### **Recommendations**

To strengthen their competitiveness in global university rankings while remaining faithful to their national mission, Nigerian universities and policymakers must adopt comprehensive strategies. The following recommendations are proposed:

#### **1. Sustainable and Diversified Funding**

The Federal Government should raise education spending to meet at least the UNESCO benchmark of 26% of national budgets. Universities must also diversify funding sources by developing alumni endowments, commercialising research outputs, and fostering public-private partnerships. International funding bodies and development partners should be engaged more strategically to support infrastructure and research grants.

#### **2. Investment in Research and Faculty Development**

Universities should prioritise research capacity building through staff development programmes, sabbatical exchanges, and postdoctoral opportunities. Dedicated funds should be allocated for research grants,

laboratory upgrades, and interdisciplinary projects. Faculty should be incentivised not only for publications in high-impact journals but also for innovations that solve local challenges.

### **3. Strengthening ICT and Digital Infrastructure**

Improving bandwidth, expanding e-library subscriptions, and adopting modern learning management systems are urgent priorities. The government and university leaders should establish national digital repositories for research output to boost global visibility. Strategic investment in cybersecurity and digital literacy will also strengthen participation in global academic networks.

### **4. Promoting Internationalisation**

Universities should adopt deliberate strategies for internationalisation, such as joint degree programmes, faculty exchange initiatives, and research collaborations with reputable global institutions. Policies should also be developed to attract international students through scholarship schemes and to invite foreign faculty to Nigerian campuses. This will enhance diversity and improve international reputation.

### **5. Reforming Governance and Ensuring Transparency**

University governance must be reformed to ensure autonomy, transparency, and accountability. Financial and administrative practices should be subjected to independent audits, and anti-corruption mechanisms should be institutionalised. Clear performance indicators should be introduced for both academic and administrative staff to improve efficiency.

### **6. Enhancing Teaching Quality and Graduate Employability**

Alongside research, universities must improve teaching quality. This requires updating curricula to reflect labour market needs, integrating soft skills, and fostering experiential learning through internships and industry partnerships. Strengthening career support services will enhance graduate employability, making Nigerian graduates more competitive globally.

### **7. Strengthening Community Engagement**

While pursuing global visibility, universities must not neglect their social missions. Institutions should invest in community-based projects, entrepreneurship hubs, and local development initiatives. By aligning ranking pursuits with national development goals, Nigerian universities can maintain relevance and legitimacy in society.

### **8. Policy Coherence and Long-term Vision**

The Federal Government, in collaboration with the National Universities Commission (NUC), should develop a long-term strategy for improving Nigeria's performance in global rankings. This strategy should be anchored on clear priorities—funding, governance, digital transformation, and research competitiveness—while ensuring that ranking ambitions do not overshadow access, equity, and national relevance.

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