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THE COMPETITIVENESS OF UZBEK HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF AN INTERNATIONAL RANKING AGENCY AND THE NATIONAL REGULATOR: A CONVERGENCE OF TWO EXTERNAL ASSESSORS



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Abstract. The article examines two external evaluative approaches relevant to the higher education system of Uzbekistan: the approach of QS Quacquarelli Symonds and that of the national authority responsible for quality assurance and the ranking system in Uzbekistan. Two semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with a QS representative and a specialist responsible for the national ranking system. The analysis reveals a notable convergence in three areas: the growing emphasis on external data to verify institutional activities, a cautious approach to whether formal compliance is sufficient to achieve substantive institutional improvement, and the important role of resource allocation in making strategic commitments credible. This convergence is significant because independent evaluation systems appear to be aligning around a common principle: data credibility and sustainable institutional capacity are more important than the volume of information provided by universities. The article also develops the concept of a “resource allocation test,” according to which a strategic priority can be considered “substantive” only when it is supported by specific resources, assigned responsibility, and a defined implementation timeline. The findings have implications for higher education governance in Uzbekistan, particularly for the formulation of ranking policy, the development of institutional data systems, research funding, and the definition of different university missions.

Keywords: Higher Education Rankings; Quality Assurance; QS; Uzbekistan; Resource Allocation; University Competitiveness; Institutional Data Governance; Institutional Isomorphism; Ranking Policy.

Annotatsiya. Maqolada O'zbekiston oliy ta'lim tizimiga tegishli bo'lgan ikkita tashqi baholash yondashuvi — QS Quacquarelli Symonds yondashuvi hamda O'zbekistonning milliy sifatni ta'minlash va reyting tizimi uchun mas'ul vakolatli organining yondashuvi tahlil qilinadi. QS vakili hamda milliy reyting tizimi uchun mas'ul mutaxassis bilan ikkita yarim tuzilgan, chuqurlashtirilgan intervyu o'tkazildi. Tahlil natijalari uchta jihatda sezilarli yaqinlik mavjudligini ko'rsatdi: muassasa faoliyatini tasdiqlashda tashqi ma'lumotlardan foydalanishga e'tiborning ortib borishi, faqat rasmiy muvofiqlikning muassasani mazmunan takomillashtirish uchun yetarli ekanligiga nisbatan ehtiyotkor yondashuv hamda strategik majburiyatlarning ishonchligini ta'minlashda resurslarni taqsimlashning muhim roli. Mazkur yaqinlik muhim ahamiyatga ega, chunki mustaqil baholash tizimlari bitta tamoyil atrofida uyg'unlashib bormoqda: universitetlar tomonidan taqdim etiladigan ma'lumotlar hajmidan ko'ra, ma'lumotlarning ishonchligi va barqaror institutsional salohiyat muhimroqdir. Maqolada, shuningdek, “resurslarni taqsimlash testi” tushunchasi rivojlantiriladi. Unga ko'ra, strategik ustuvor yo'nalish muayyan resurslar, mas'uliyat va amalga oshirish muddatlari bilan ta'minlangan taqdirdagina “mazmunan asoslangan” hisoblanadi. Natijalar O'zbekistonda oliy ta'limni boshqarish, xususan, reyting siyosatini shakllantirish, institutsional ma'lumotlar tizimini rivojlantirish, ilmiy tadqiqotlarni moliyalashtirish hamda universitetlarning turli missiyalarini belgilash uchun muhim ahamiyatga ega.

Kalit so'zlar: Oliy ta'lim reytinglari; sifatni ta'minlash; QS; O'zbekiston; resurslarni taqsimlash; universitet raqobatbardoshligi; institutsional ma'lumotlarni boshqarish; institutsional izomorfizm; reyting siyosati.

Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются два внешних оценочных подхода, имеющих непосредственное отношение к системе высшего образования Узбекистана: подход QS Quacquarelli Symonds и подход национального органа, ответственного за обеспечение качества и систему рейтингов в Узбекистане. Были проведены два полуструктурированных глубоких интервью с представителем QS и специалистом, ответственным за

национальную систему рейтингов. Результаты анализа выявили значительное сходство по трем направлениям: возрастающее внимание к использованию внешних данных для подтверждения деятельности образовательных учреждений, осторожный подход к оценке достаточности формального соответствия для содержательного совершенствования учреждения, а также важная роль распределения ресурсов в обеспечении достоверности стратегических обязательств. Данное сходство имеет важное значение, поскольку независимые системы оценки постепенно сближаются вокруг единого принципа: достоверность данных и устойчивый институциональный потенциал имеют большее значение, чем объем информации, предоставляемой университетами. В статье также развивается понятие «теста распределения ресурсов», согласно которому стратегический приоритет может считаться «содержательно обоснованным» только в том случае, если он обеспечен конкретными ресурсами, ответственностью и сроками реализации. Полученные результаты имеют значение для управления высшим образованием в Узбекистане, особенно для формирования рейтинговой политики, развития институциональных систем данных, финансирования научных исследований и определения различных миссий университетов.

Ключевые слова: рейтинги высшего образования; обеспечение качества; QS; Узбекистан; распределение ресурсов; конкурентоспособность университетов; управление институциональными данными; институциональный изоморфизм; рейтинговая политика.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of institutional success is increasingly shaped by international rankings and national quality-assurance mechanisms. Although these systems differ in scope and purpose, both provide external mechanisms that encourage universities to assess, report, and improve their performance. Uzbekistan provides a relevant context for examining higher education reform because its reform agenda explicitly connects international ranking objectives with national mechanisms for measuring and enhancing institutional performance. The Concept for the Development of the Higher Education System of the Republic of Uzbekistan until 2030 established a national goal of placing at least 10 higher education institutions (HEIs) among the top 1,000 in international rankings and expanded the reform agenda to encompass quality, competition, and institutional development. Information on participation in international rankings and national ranking-related policies continues to be published by the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation.

This policy environment provides an important analytical context. Universities are subject to both international evaluation, including assessments conducted by organisations such as QS, and national evaluation through the state quality-assurance and ranking system. Although these two systems differ in geographical scope and institutional purpose, their potential convergence around data credibility, resource commitment, and substantive institutional improvement may reveal an underlying logic of contemporary higher education governance.

The article addresses three questions: (1) What do the two interviewed external evaluators identify as reliable and appropriate sources of institutional data? (2) What distinguishes substantive institutional development from formal compliance with established requirements? and (3) What does the convergence of these perspectives suggest for university governance and the 2030 policy agenda in Uzbekistan?

The contribution of the study is specific rather than comprehensive. It does not claim that two interviews fully represent the institutional positions of QS or the national regulatory institution. Instead, it identifies a point of convergence between two influential institutional perspectives and uses this convergence as a basis for a governance proposition: as evaluators increasingly rely on independently verifiable indicators, the strategic value of reporting improvements becomes increasingly linked to the development of institutional capabilities that generate credible and sustainable performance indicators.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The first theoretical lens is institutional isomorphism. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) explain that coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures can make organisations increasingly similar. Ranking systems may generate all three forms of pressure: governments can encourage universities to focus on specific indicators, universities can benchmark against and learn from higher-ranked institutions, and professional communities can establish norms related to research, internationalisation, and data management.

The second lens concerns substantive and ceremonial change. Meyer and Rowan (1977) suggest that organisations can gain legitimacy through formal structures without necessarily transforming their core processes. This distinction is particularly relevant to rankings because establishing a ranking office, strategic plan, or performance dashboard does not, by itself, necessarily indicate improvements in research quality or international collaboration. Espeland and Sauder (2007) further demonstrate that public measures can be reactive: once institutions are ranked, the measurement process itself may influence organisational behaviour.

The third perspective is based on reputation and information asymmetry, which explains why external rankings rely on signals that can be compared across institutions. The overall quality of a university is not

directly observable to students, employers, researchers, and policymakers. Reputation, research impact, and international collaboration therefore function as important signals. Their usefulness depends on the reliability and comparability of the underlying data.

The fourth lens is resource dependence theory, which helps explain why evaluation standards may produce different outcomes across universities. For a strategic requirement to have substantive value, institutions need sufficient resources to implement it. This principle underlies the article's "resource allocation test": a declared strategic priority can be considered substantive when it is supported by a budget, assigned accountability to a person or unit, and accompanied by a realistic implementation timeline.

The current QS methodology further highlights the importance of indicators that cannot be reduced to institutional claims. Academic reputation, citations per faculty, employer reputation, faculty-student ratio, and international research networks are among the indicators included in the QS World University Rankings methodology. According to QS, indicator weightings are updated annually. Academic reputation accounts for 30% of the overall ranking, citations per faculty for 20%, and employer reputation for 15%.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The design of the study is exploratory, qualitative, and a case study. The main empirical evidence is in the form of two semi-structured interviews. The first interview was with a QS Quacquarelli Symonds representative and centred around the trajectory of the ranking of the universities of Uzbekistan and Central Asian countries and the difference between development and stagnation, as well as the difference between the legitimate path and manipulation. The second interview was with a specialist knowledgeable about the national ranking system and the processes and procedures of higher education policy and quality assurance. The two respondents did not know the answers of the other and were interviewed separately. This feature does not render the findings statistically representative but helps to enhance the meaning of the similarities observed, as the convergence is not generated by a common interview or direct contact between the interviewees. Thematic analysis was used to analyze. Four themes were used to organise statements: data reliability, substantive vs symbolic strategy, resource allocation and national differentiation. The study then saw a comparison between the two institutional perspectives and areas of convergence and divergence. The study has two respondents, and all organisation-level claims are therefore carefully stated as a view of the representatives interviewed and not as a statement on the views of all policies or employees in QS or the national regulator. Official Public Information is also used to provide context to the interviews conducted. In particular, the official QS methodology and the higher education policy documents in Uzbekistan are used to highlight the difference between the interview interpretation and institutional and policy facts, which are documented independently.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The most important finding is the analytical convergence between the two interviews regarding data credibility. The QS representative described a growing emphasis on information that can be verified through external sources rather than relying solely on data provided by universities. The national ranking representative similarly highlighted the use of independently verified external databases and other sources outside the national evaluation process. Although two interviews cannot establish how widespread data manipulation is across the Uzbek higher education system, they provide evidence that the reliability and verifiability of institutional information are important considerations in both external evaluation perspectives. This convergence suggests that universities should focus increasingly on improving actual institutional performance, which can be reflected through independently verifiable external data, rather than concentrating primarily on the presentation of information.

This approach is consistent with the current QS methodology, which incorporates research and citation data, reputation surveys, international research-network measures, and other indicators. QS identifies citations per faculty as an indicator of research output and impact, while international research networks reflect sustained research collaboration.

The convergence is analytically significant because the two evaluators operate according to different institutional logics: QS functions as a commercial organisation that evaluates universities against global peer standards, whereas the national evaluator operates within the government's quality-assurance framework. Nevertheless, both approaches appear to move toward independently verifiable metrics rather than self-reported institutional narratives. Examples include publication data from Scopus or Web of Science, patent registries, and third-party survey data. This development represents a broader trend in institutional performance evaluation and suggests that independently verifiable evidence is becoming increasingly important across both commercial and regulatory channels.

The interviews also support a longer-term perspective on ranking performance. Indicators such as reputation, citations, and sustained international collaboration generally cannot be substantially changed within a single year through one administrative decision. The current QS methodology describes academic reputation as a global survey-based measure and citations per faculty as an indicator of research impact, while international research networks reflect sustained partnerships. Consequently, a university that initiates large-scale research investment may not immediately observe its effects in ranking outcomes. This creates a governance challenge because institutional decision-making cycles are often shorter than the period required for performance indicators to improve. Continuity in institutional strategy, multi-year research funding, and stable strategic priorities are therefore important components of ranking policy.

Ranking outcomes may consequently reflect the cumulative effects of previous institutional activity. The precise time lag depends on the indicator and ranking edition. For universities at the beginning of the ranking process, this means that their position in a future ranking is influenced not only by investments made during the current year but also by decisions and investments made over several preceding years. Current reputation scores may therefore reflect earlier institutional priorities and decisions made by previous leadership. This temporal dimension highlights the importance of maintaining long-term investments in areas such as doctoral training and research infrastructure alongside shorter-term interventions.

A second key finding concerns the distinction between strategic statements and credible strategic commitments. The QS interview suggests that when an institution establishes a new strategic priority, the priority needs to be supported by adequate resources for implementation. The national perspective similarly relates institutional behaviour to resource allocation and performance incentives. The article formalises this finding through the “resource allocation test.” A strategic objective is substantively supported when it has an identifiable budget or resource allocation, an accountable person or unit, and a clear implementation timeframe. Where these elements are absent, the objective may function primarily as a declaration of intent.

Although simple, the test provides a practical tool for distinguishing strategic planning from strategic implementation. It also connects institutional theory with ranking governance. Meyer and Rowan (1977) explain that formal structures can provide legitimacy without necessarily transforming internal operations. The resource allocation test evaluates whether a formal strategic commitment is accompanied by corresponding operational change.

If the strategic priorities discussed in the interviews are considered representative of broader sectoral practices, a significant proportion of ranking-related priorities may not yet contain all three elements, with budget allocation often being the missing component. This suggests that resources may sometimes be allocated after a priority has been established rather than being incorporated into the priority from the outset. From a Meyer and Rowan (1977) perspective, announcing a priority can provide legitimacy relatively quickly and at limited immediate cost, whereas allocating resources requires greater material and organisational commitment. The resource allocation test therefore functions not only as a diagnostic tool but also as a design principle: strategic documents should specify the priority, resources, responsibility, and implementation timeframe as an integrated framework.

At the national level, the interviews indicate that Uzbek universities do not necessarily need to pursue international competition in the same manner or at the same pace. This is consistent with the rationale of the 2030 concept, under which participation among the top 1,000 institutions is established as a numerical national target rather than as an expectation that all institutions will enter the ranking simultaneously. The official policy identifies at least 10 institutions as national objectives and/or flagship ambitions.

This finding is relevant to policy communication. Mission-based differentiation is possible because universities differ in their missions, disciplinary profiles, and resources. However, when differentiation is not clearly communicated, it may be perceived as unequal treatment rather than as a policy based on institutional mission. Effective governance therefore requires differentiation to be explicit, evidence-based, and linked to transparent criteria.

According to current official reports, Uzbekistan’s ranking system is becoming increasingly diversified. In the QS 2025 results, seven Uzbek universities were included in the global ranking, while three universities had been added to the top 1,000 universities by the government. The 2026 QS subject rankings also indicate an increase in participation across different fields, including Tashkent State University of Economics, the National University of Uzbekistan, and TIAME-NRU.

The differentiation of institutional priorities may also contribute to a more diverse higher education landscape. If the criteria defining flagship status, including relevant indicators and thresholds, are made explicit and publicly available, non-flagship institutions can identify mission-appropriate competitive approaches, such as participation in subject-specific rankings rather than overall rankings. This can enable institutions to align their competitive strategies with their missions and available resources.

The QS interview also highlights a broader governance issue concerning the use of publication targets as

measures of international competitiveness. When publication quotas are established without corresponding mechanisms for research quality and capacity development, institutions may have stronger incentives to increase publication volume. This reflects the concept of target displacement, in which an indicator can become the target rather than a measure of the underlying objective.

This does not diminish the importance of publication metrics. Publication and citation indicators remain important measures of research activity and impact. However, publication objectives should be accompanied by mechanisms supporting research quality, international collaboration, doctoral training, research infrastructure, and selective priority areas. This interpretation is consistent with existing research on rankings and institutional responses, which indicates that institutions may adapt their behaviour to the measurement system itself.

In a national system where publication numbers directly influence institutional funding, target displacement may become a rational response to the incentive structure. Institutions may prioritise maximising publication counts rather than broader research impact or significance. To address this incentive structure, funding formulas could incorporate quality-oriented indicators such as citation-normalised impact, journal or venue rankings, and peer assessment. Publication-count incentives are likely to generate strong responses for as long as they remain the dominant incentives within the system.

The interviews revealed convergence from input reporting toward the credibility of outcomes. For universities at an earlier stage of ranking development, data preparation and submission may provide substantial organisational value. However, as external evaluators increasingly rely on third-party information, the strategic value of data submission itself may decrease. This does not diminish the importance of university data offices. Rather, the importance of internal data governance increases because institutions need accurate information to guide performance, identify gaps, and anticipate external evaluation requirements. The role of institutional data management therefore shifts from constructing a positive narrative toward maintaining reliable management information and improving actual institutional performance.

This convergence also allows rankings to be interpreted in terms of institutional capacity. Although external evaluators may measure different constructs, both require credible evidence of institutional activity. Research quality, international cooperation, reputation, and student-related indicators cannot depend solely on administrative presentation; they are supported by human resources, funding, institutional procedures, and long-term institutional planning.

The article therefore distinguishes between “ranking compliance” and “ranking capability.” Ranking compliance involves responding to requests, preparing documents, and establishing formal structures. Ranking capability refers to the organisational resources and skills required to generate research, collaborations, reputation, and other results that can be independently validated by external evaluators. The two can coexist, but ranking capability is more likely to generate sustained improvements in international competitiveness.

The distinction between ranking compliance and ranking capability also has a testable implication that cannot be examined through the two interviews used in this study but could be addressed in future research. If the distinction is empirically valid, institutions with similar published ranking scores should differ in their underlying institutional capacity. For example, differences could be examined through the proportion of research output generated through sustained international co-authorship networks compared with output produced primarily to meet publication targets. Such capacity differences could then be tested as predictors of whether institutions sustain or improve their ranking positions over subsequent multi-year periods or experience more stable performance. This would require linking ranking-cycle panel data with institutional case evidence of the type collected in this study. Although such an analysis was beyond the present exploratory design, it represents a logical extension of the two interviews and a potential direction for a broader research programme.

Policy Recommendations

Use ranking data as a management tool. Ranking-related data should support institutional management rather than function primarily as a reporting requirement. Internal dashboards should connect research, internationalisation, staffing, and student outcomes with strategic decision-making. Data-quality teams should work collaboratively with research, finance, human resources, and international offices rather than operate as isolated ranking teams.

Link strategic goals to implementation resources. Each key ranking-related strategic goal should identify a responsible person or unit, a budget allocation, and a clear implementation timeline. These three elements can serve as a minimum implementation test for University Boards or Councils during annual strategic planning reviews.

Maintain continuity in research policy. Research priorities should be implemented with sufficient continuity because reputation, citations, and international research networks develop over time. Multi-year programmes can support the development of research groups, international co-authorship networks, and institutional reputation.

Make differentiation criteria transparent. Where the national strategy applies differentiated priorities, the

relevant criteria should be publicly communicated. Universities should understand which institutional mission is prioritised, whether global ranking, regional development, teaching excellence, professional education, research specialisation, or another mission. Differentiation should not limit the development of non-priority institutions; rather, they should have appropriate development pathways.

Strengthen data interoperability and reliability. The increasing use of third-party data requires stronger interoperability between national and institutional systems and reliable research and administrative data. Institutions should minimise duplicate manual reporting where possible and establish auditable data pipelines. This can improve both operational efficiency and confidence in institutional data.

Limitations and Future Research

The main limitation of the study is the small number of respondents. Two interviews cannot fully represent the institutional positions of QS or the national regulator; therefore, the findings should be understood as a preliminary comparison of two institutional perspectives. Second, the study relies substantially on interview evidence and cannot independently verify all reported operational practices. Third, the study does not include a matched comparison with other countries. Fourth, its cross-sectional design does not allow assessment of whether the reported policy changes remain consistent over time.

Future research could replicate the study with several representatives from each organisation, together with university ranking officers, research managers, and policymakers. Cross-country comparisons could examine whether similar convergence occurs in other emerging higher education systems, including Kazakhstan, Türkiye, and the Gulf States. Longitudinal research could also assess whether increased reliance on third-party data influences university reporting practices and research funding. Another promising direction is to operationalise the concepts of “ranking compliance” and “ranking capability” by developing indicators of data-reporting capacity, research-management capacity, international-network capacity, and strategic resource allocation, and examining their ability to predict changes in institutional rankings over time.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article examined two external evaluative perspectives relevant to higher education in Uzbekistan: an international ranking agency and the national quality-assurance and ranking agency. The study does not suggest that the two organisations are institutionally identical or that two interviews fully represent their respective positions. Rather, it identifies a meaningful convergence between the perspectives examined: credible institutional performance is increasingly associated with independently verifiable evidence, substantive organisational development, and the resources required to implement strategic priorities.

The findings indicate that Uzbek universities are entering a new stage in the development of ranking-related governance. As external evaluators increasingly rely on independently verifiable indicators, the strategic value of information as a means of demonstrating competitiveness may decrease. At the same time, internal data governance becomes more important because universities require reliable information to manage performance and develop externally verifiable results.

The article’s main practical contribution is the “resource allocation test.” The quality of the wording of a strategic priority alone is insufficient to assess its substantive value. A strategic priority should also be evaluated in terms of available resources, clearly assigned responsibility, and a realistic implementation timeframe. Consistent application of this test can help universities move beyond formal compliance toward substantive institutional capacity building.

For Uzbekistan’s 2030 agenda, the findings suggest the importance of a balanced approach to ranking policy that combines competitiveness objectives with the development of research, internationalisation, data governance, and institutional management capacities that can be observed and verified by external evaluators. In this way, international rankings can become an integral component of a broader institutional development system.

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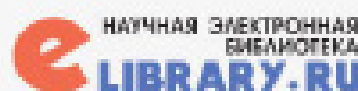
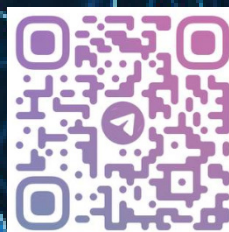
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