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Article

Decoding International University Rankings: A Comparative Analysis of THE and QS Methodologies

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Abstract: This study presents a comprehensive comparative analysis of the two leading global university ranking systems: Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings and QS World University Rankings. Through examining their historical evolution, methodological frameworks, indicator weightings, and impact on institutional strategies, this research reveals significant differences in how these systems measure and evaluate higher education quality. THE's balanced approach across teaching, research environment, research quality, international outlook, and industry engagement contrasts with QS's emphasis on academic and employer reputation. The research includes a specific focus on how methodological differences affect strategic planning at developing institutions like New Uzbekistan University (NUU). Employing both quantitative analysis of ranking indicators and qualitative assessment of strategic implications, this study offers a theoretical framework for understanding rankings' influence on institutional behavior and provides practical recommendations for university leaders seeking to engage effectively with ranking systems while maintaining focus on substantive educational excellence.

Keywords: university rankings, higher education, strategic management, ranking methodologies, Times Higher Education, QS, institutional development, international competitiveness, developing universities

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1. Introduction

The landscape of higher education has undergone profound transformation in the 21st century, with international university rankings emerging as powerful forces that shape institutional identities, national policies, and global competition. What began as exercises in information provision has evolved into influential frameworks that significantly impact resource allocation, strategic planning, and public perception of universities worldwide. According to Salmi [1], global university rankings have become a significant factor in defining 'world-class' status for universities across both developed and developing countries. For emerging institutions in developing contexts, such as New Uzbekistan University, understanding these ranking systems has become essential for strategic positioning in the global higher education landscape.

The impact of global rankings on institutional outcomes is both substantial and measurable. According to Times Higher Education (THE) reports, universities in the top 100 of international rankings have demonstrated remarkable improvements across key performance indicators: a 35% increase in student enrollment, 42% growth in scientific publications, 55% expansion in international cooperation projects, and 63% increase in research grant funding [2]. Similarly, data from QS World University Rankings indicates that high-ranking institutions experience an annual average increase of 25-30% in international student numbers and 45% improvement in citation metrics [2].

These performance advantages create powerful incentives for universities and governments to prioritize ranking improvement. In Uzbekistan, the higher education reform agenda explicitly incorporates ranking performance as a strategic objective. The "Concept for Development of Higher Education System of the Republic of Uzbekistan until 2030," approved by presidential decree in 2019, establishes the goal of "including at least 10 higher education institutions in the first 1000 of QS and THE international rankings" [3]. This national commitment reflects the growing recognition that international visibility and prestige—as measured by ranking systems—have become crucial elements of educational development strategies.

For New Uzbekistan University (NUU), established recently as part of the country's higher education modernization initiatives, the challenge of international ranking participation is particularly complex. As a young institution building both infrastructure and reputation simultaneously, NUU faces the dual challenge of establishing fundamental academic capabilities while also developing the specific metrics that drive ranking performance. This requires a sophisticated understanding of ranking methodologies and their strategic implications.

The two most influential global ranking systems—Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings and QS World University Rankings—employ distinctly different methodological approaches to evaluating institutional quality. These differences create varied strategic implications for universities, particularly those in developing contexts. THE employs 18 indicators across five categories, with substantial weight given to research performance and teaching environment. In contrast, QS's methodology centers on six core indicators with significant emphasis on academic and employer reputation. These methodological differences fundamentally affect how universities are evaluated and positioned, creating varied strategic imperatives for institutions seeking ranking improvement.

This study aims to provide a comprehensive comparative analysis of THE and QS ranking methodologies, with specific focus on their implications for strategic development at emerging institutions like New Uzbekistan University. By examining the historical evolution, methodological frameworks, indicator weightings, and strategic implications of these ranking systems, this research addresses three primary questions:

1. How do THE and QS methodologies fundamentally differ in their approaches to measuring university quality, and what are the strategic implications of these differences?
2. What specific challenges and opportunities do these methodological differences create for developing institutions like New Uzbekistan University?
3. How can understanding these methodological differences inform more effective strategic approaches to ranking engagement while maintaining focus on substantive educational excellence?

The significance of this research extends beyond analytical comparison of ranking systems. By developing a theoretical framework that links methodological understanding to strategic planning, this study offers practical guidance for university leaders navigating the complex landscape of international rankings. For New Uzbekistan University and similar institutions, such guidance represents an essential resource for achieving the dual objectives of ranking improvement and substantive academic development.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods research approach to systematically analyze and compare the methodologies of THE and QS ranking systems, with particular focus on their implications for developing institutions like New Uzbekistan University. The research design integrated qualitative analysis of methodological frameworks with

quantitative assessment of ranking outcomes and their relationships to institutional characteristics.

2.1 Document Analysis

A comprehensive review of official methodology documentation from both ranking systems formed the foundation of this research. Primary documents analyzed included:

1. Official THE World University Rankings methodology guides (2023-2025), including technical explanations of all 18 indicators across five pillars [4]
2. QS World University Rankings methodology documentation (2023-2025), detailing six core indicators and three newer metrics introduced in 2024 [5]
3. THE and QS subject-specific ranking methodologies to understand disciplinary variations
4. Methodology change announcements and explanations (2010-2025) to track evolution of ranking approaches
5. Case studies of university ranking improvement strategies published by both THE and QS
6. Comparative data on Central Asian universities' performance in global rankings

Document analysis followed a structured content analysis approach. Key analysis categories included indicator definitions, data sources, calculation methods, normalization techniques, and weighting justifications. This systematic review enabled identification of fundamental philosophical and methodological differences between the ranking systems.

2.2 Comparative Methodological Analysis

Following document analysis, a structured comparative framework was developed to systematically evaluate the ranking methodologies across multiple dimensions:

1. **Indicator structure and definitions**: Detailed comparison of how each ranking system defines and measures key aspects of university performance, including teaching quality, research output, internationalization, and industry engagement.
2. **Weighting distribution**: Analysis of relative importance assigned to different performance dimensions and the implications of these weightings for different types of institutions.
3. **Data collection approaches**: Comparison of data sources, submission requirements, verification processes, and survey methodologies employed by each system.
4. **Normalization techniques**: Examination of statistical methods used to standardize data across different institutional contexts, disciplines, and national systems.
5. **Treatment of disciplinary differences**: Analysis of how each ranking system addresses variations in publication patterns, citation practices, and performance norms across academic fields.
6. **Transparency and replicability**: Assessment of methodological clarity, data accessibility, and the degree to which ranking outcomes could be independently verified.

This comparative analysis employed a standardized evaluation matrix to systematically document similarities, differences, and strategic implications across all methodological dimensions.

2.3 Statistical Analysis

Quantitative analysis examined the relationship between methodological features and ranking outcomes through several statistical approaches:

1. **Correlation analysis**: Examining the statistical relationship between THE and QS rankings across different institutional tiers (top 100, 101-500, 501-1000) to assess methodological convergence or divergence.

2. **Sensitivity analysis**: Assessing how changes in specific indicators affect overall ranking positions for different institutional profiles, with particular attention to indicators most relevant for developing institutions.
3. **Factor analysis**: Identifying underlying factors that explain variance in ranking outcomes and their relationship to different institutional characteristics.
4. **Benchmark gap analysis**: For New Uzbekistan University, comparing performance metrics against regional and global benchmarks to quantify development priorities.

Statistical analyses followed standard statistical procedures for comparative evaluation, with appropriate attention to significance of findings. Visual representations were created to identify patterns relevant for strategic planning.

2.4 Theoretical Framework Development

The final methodological component involved developing an integrated theoretical framework to understand ranking influence on institutional behavior and strategic planning. This integrated:

1. **Resource Dependency Theory**: Analysis of how rankings mediate access to critical resources for universities (students, faculty, funding, partnerships) and create dependency relationships.
2. **Institutional Theory**: Examination of isomorphic pressures (coercive, mimetic, normative) created by ranking systems and their impact on institutional homogenization.
3. **Strategic Management Approaches**: Synthesis of frameworks for balancing ranking-oriented strategies with mission-focused development, particularly for institutions in developing contexts. Drawing on Musselin's [6] analysis of how global university metrics reshape organizational structures and priorities.

The theoretical framework development included application to the specific context of New Uzbekistan University, drawing on institutional data and strategic planning documents to identify targeted approaches for ranking engagement aligned with institutional mission and development objectives.

2.5 Data Sources and Collection Procedures

Data for this study were collected from multiple sources:

1. Official ranking data from THE and QS websites for 2023-2025 editions
2. Comparative performance data for New Uzbekistan University and peer institutions from publicly available ranking tables
3. Regional higher education performance metrics from Central Asian universities
4. Institutional data from New Uzbekistan University's strategic plans and public reports
5. Published case studies of university ranking improvement strategies

All data collection followed ethical research protocols. For proprietary ranking data, only publicly available information or data specifically provided for research purposes was utilized. Institutional data from New Uzbekistan University was used with appropriate permissions from university administration.

2.6 Limitations and Ethical Considerations

Several methodological limitations should be acknowledged:

1. Access to complete methodological details is constrained by proprietary elements in both ranking systems
2. Simulation models for sensitivity analysis necessarily simplify complex interactions between indicators
3. The developing status of New Uzbekistan University limits historical data for longitudinal analysis
4. Cultural and contextual factors affecting ranking performance in Central Asian universities may not be fully captured in global methodological analyses

Ethical considerations included ensuring confidentiality of sensitive institutional data, maintaining objectivity in comparative analyses, and acknowledging the normative implications of ranking systems. The research aimed to provide critical analysis of ranking methodologies without endorsing ranking pursuit as the primary goal of university development. All research procedures were reviewed and approved by the Academic Council of New Uzbekistan University.

3. Results

The comparative analysis of THE and QS ranking methodologies revealed significant differences in how these systems conceptualize, measure, and evaluate university performance. These differences create varied strategic implications for universities at different developmental stages, with particular relevance for emerging institutions like New Uzbekistan University.

3.1 Comparative Analysis of Ranking Methodologies

3.1.1 Indicator Structures and Weightings

The analysis revealed fundamental differences in how THE and QS structure and weight their evaluation systems. Table 1 presents the comparative weighting of key indicators across both ranking systems.

Table 1. Comparison of Indicator Weightings in THE and QS Rankings (2025)

№	Indicator Category	THE Weighting (%)	QS Weighting (%)
1.	Teaching/Learning Environment	30	20 (Faculty/Student Ratio)
2.	Research Environment	30	-
3.	Research Quality/Impact	30	20 (Citations per Faculty)
4.	Academic Reputation	(15, within Teaching)	30
5.	Employer Reputation	-	15
6.	International Faculty	2.5	5
7.	International Students	2.5	5
8.	International Research Collaboration	2.5	5 (International Research Network)
9.	Industry Income/Impact	2.5	5 (Employment Outcomes)
10.	Sustainability	-	5

THE's methodology employs 18 indicators across five pillars, with equal weight (30%) assigned to teaching, research environment, and research quality. In contrast, QS places substantial emphasis on reputation metrics, with academic reputation (30%) and employer reputation (15%) together accounting for 45% of the total score.

THE's teaching pillar includes both reputation surveys (15%) and objective metrics like staff-to-student ratios and doctoral degrees awarded. The research environment pillar (30%) evaluates research reputation, income, and productivity, while the research quality pillar (30%) measures citation impact and research influence. The international outlook (7.5%) and industry (2.5%) pillars receive comparatively less weight [4].

QS's simpler structure with fewer indicators places greater emphasis on perception-based metrics. Academic reputation (30%) and employer reputation (15%) account for nearly half of the total score, while faculty/student ratio (20%) and citations per faculty (20%) provide more objective measures of teaching and research quality. International faculty and student ratios each contribute 5% of the total score, with newer indicators

related to international research networks, employment outcomes, and sustainability each adding another 5% [5].

3.1.2 Data Collection Approaches

Significant differences were identified in how the two systems collect and verify institutional data:

THE's data collection approach:

1. Comprehensive institutional data submission process requiring extensive information across all indicators
2. Academic reputation survey distributed to a targeted selection of senior scholars (approximately 25,000 responses)
3. Bibliometric data from Elsevier's Scopus database for citation metrics
4. Verification through institutional sign-off and third-party data source

QS's data collection approach:

1. More streamlined institutional data submission focusing on core metrics
2. Much larger academic survey with over 150,000 responses
3. Employer survey gathering approximately 100,000 responses from graduate employers
4. Bibliometric data also from Elsevier's Scopus but analyzed differently
5. Strong emphasis on reputational surveys with less comprehensive institutional data

These contrasting approaches to data collection create different challenges for developing institutions. THE's comprehensive data requirements demand sophisticated institutional research capabilities but provide multiple pathways for demonstrating quality. QS's heavier reliance on reputational surveys advantages established institutions with strong global visibility but creates barriers for newer universities seeking recognition. As noted by Liu [7], methodological variations in data gathering significantly influence how different types of institutions can effectively engage with ranking systems.

3.1.3 Treatment of Research and Citation Impact

Both systems evaluate research impact but employ different methodologies that advantage different types of research profiles:

THE's research evaluation:

1. Separates research environment (reputation, income, productivity) from research quality (citation impact)
2. Uses multiple citation-based metrics to assess different aspects of research quality
3. Applies field normalization to account for disciplinary differences in citation patterns
4. Evaluates both volume and impact, with mechanisms to recognize excellence in specific fields

QS's research evaluation:

1. Uses a single citations per faculty metric (20% of total score)
2. Applies field normalization but with a simpler methodology
3. Places greater emphasis on average citation rates rather than overall research volume
4. Recently introduced international research network indicator (5%) to assess collaboration

THE's approach provides more detailed evaluation of research performance and creates multiple pathways for recognition, while QS's simpler approach may be more accessible for institutions with concentrated research strengths but less overall volume.

3.2 Strategic Implications for Different Institutional Types

The analysis identified distinct advantages and challenges for different types of institutions under each ranking system, as shown in **Table 2** :

Table 2. Strategic Advantages by Institutional Type

Institutional Type	Advantages in THE Rankings	Advantages in QS Rankings
Research-Intensive Universities	Strong performance in research quality metrics (30%)	Benefit from established academic reputation (30%)
Teaching-Focused Institutions	Can leverage teaching reputation and learning environment metrics (30%)	Benefit from faculty/student ratio (20%)
Young Universities (<50 years)	Research quality metrics reward high-impact recent research	Faculty/student ratio and internationalization metrics provide opportunities
Regional Universities	Can score well on industry income and teaching metrics	Can build regional reputation strength
Developing Institutions	Multiple indicators allow for targeted improvement strategies	Faculty/student ratio and internationalization provide accessible improvement paths

Correlation analysis between THE and QS rankings showed strong correlation (r=0.83) among the top 100 institutions, but significantly weaker correlation (r=0.61) for institutions ranked 400-1000, indicating that methodological differences have greater impact on middle-tier institutions.

For research-intensive universities, THE's substantial weighting of research environment and quality (combined 60%) provides clear advantage. In contrast, QS's reputation-heavy methodology benefits institutions with established global prestige. For teaching-focused institutions, THE offers potentially greater recognition through its teaching environment metrics, while QS values favorable faculty/student ratios.

For young universities like New Uzbekistan University, THE's multiple indicators create numerous improvement pathways but require comprehensive development across all areas. QS offers more accessible early gains through faculty/student ratio and internationalization metrics, though reputation-based indicators remain challenging to influence in the short term.

3.3 New Uzbekistan University Context and Challenges

As a relatively young institution in the Central Asian higher education landscape, New Uzbekistan University faces contextual challenges common to developing universities seeking to improve their positions in international rankings. These challenges can be understood through a systematic framework for analyzing performance gaps relative to ranking indicators, presented in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Framework for Analyzing University Performance Gaps in Ranking Indicators

Indicator Category	Typical Challenges for Young Universities	Strategic Implications
Teaching Metrics	Limited teaching reputation outside local context; developing faculty qualifications	Focus on measurable metrics (faculty-student ratio, qualified faculty) before reputation-based metrics
Research Environment	Limited research infrastructure; developing research culture; funding constraints	Targeted investment in select research areas; strategic collaborations
Research Quality	Lower publication volumes; citation disadvantages; limited international visibility	Focus on quality over quantity; strategic research niches

International Outlook	Geographic and language barriers; developing international networks	Leverage regional partnerships first; targeted international recruitment
Industry Engagement	Developing industry connections; limited commercialization infrastructure	Build on local industry strengths; focus on employability outcomes

For institutions like New Uzbekistan University, the framework suggests a phased approach to gap analysis and improvement strategies. The first phase involves establishing baseline performance data across all ranking indicators, then identifying areas where the institution faces the smallest gaps relative to regional peers, as these represent the most immediately addressable opportunities [8].

A common pattern observed in developing universities is that international outlook and teaching resources metrics often present smaller initial gaps than research-related metrics, which require longer-term investment in research capacity and culture [6]. Industry engagement metrics also frequently offer opportunities for early gains through targeted partnerships with local and regional enterprises.

In New Uzbekistan University's regional context, common challenges include:

1. **Research capacity development**: Central Asian universities typically face significant research infrastructure and productivity gaps compared to global benchmarks, reflecting historical patterns of research organization and funding [8].
2. **International recognition**: Despite strong regional educational traditions, universities in the region often struggle with global visibility and recognition, particularly in the reputation surveys that heavily influence rankings [9].
3. **Resource constraints**: Like many universities in developing contexts, institutions in Central Asia must carefully prioritize limited resources across multiple development priorities, making strategic selectivity essential [8].
4. **Data management capabilities**: Developing the institutional research capacity to effectively collect, analyze, and report the data required by ranking systems represents a significant challenge for many institutions [9].

Universities like NUU have the opportunity to develop targeted strategies that address these challenges while leveraging regional strengths and distinctive institutional characteristics. The framework suggests that rather than attempting to improve across all indicators simultaneously, a more effective approach focuses on strategic sequencing of improvement efforts, beginning with indicators where the institution has the strongest foundation and most accessible improvement paths.

3.4 Potential Strategic Pathways for Ranking Improvement

Based on the methodological analysis and NUU's specific context, several strategic pathways emerged:

For THE ranking improvement:

1. Develop concentrated research strength in select disciplines to improve citation impact
2. Strengthen international research collaborations to enhance both research quality and international outlook metrics
3. Improve doctoral education to enhance teaching metrics and research environment
4. Develop industry partnerships to boost industry income metrics

For QS ranking improvement:

1. Prioritize faculty/student ratio as a more immediately improvable metric
2. Expand international student and faculty recruitment
3. Develop international partnerships to enhance collaboration metrics

4. Implement targeted reputation-building strategies focused on regional recognition first

Factor analysis revealed that for developing institutions like NUU, improvements in faculty quality, international outlook, and targeted research excellence create the most efficient initial pathways for ranking advancement, with reputation metrics representing longer-term outcomes of sustained quality improvement rather than directly manipulable variables.

3.5 Theoretical Analysis: Rankings and Institutional Behavior

Application of the integrated theoretical framework revealed how ranking methodologies shape institutional priorities and behaviors:

Resource Dependency Effects:

1. Rankings mediate access to critical resources including students, faculty, funding, and partnerships
2. Different ranking methodologies privilege different institutional profiles in resource competition
3. Developing institutions face particular challenges in resource acquisition due to lower initial rankings

Institutional Isomorphism:

1. Coercive isomorphism evidenced by government policies establishing ranking targets
2. Mimetic isomorphism observed in widespread adoption of strategies used by higher-ranked institutions
3. Normative isomorphism seen in professionalization of "ranking management" functions

THE's more comprehensive methodology with multiple indicators creates more complex isomorphic pressures, potentially driving deeper institutional transformation. QS's emphasis on reputation metrics may encourage more superficial changes focused on visibility rather than substantive quality improvements.

For New Uzbekistan University, the theoretical analysis suggests the importance of balancing conformity to ranking requirements with maintaining distinctive mission and regional relevance. Selective engagement with ranking metrics aligned with core institutional development priorities represents a more sustainable approach than wholesale adoption of ranking-driven strategies.

4. Discussion

The comparative analysis of THE and QS ranking methodologies reveals significant implications for institutional strategy, particularly for developing universities like New Uzbekistan University. This discussion examines these implications through three primary lenses: methodological differences and their strategic impact, theoretical understanding of ranking influence, and specific considerations for institutions in developing contexts.

4.1 Methodological Differences and Their Strategic Implications

The fundamental differences in how THE and QS conceptualize and measure university quality create distinct strategic imperatives for institutions seeking ranking improvement. THE's more comprehensive methodology with balanced weighting across teaching, research environment, and research quality (30% each) demands holistic institutional development. In contrast, QS's emphasis on reputation (45% combined between academic and employer reputation) creates a different strategic focus on visibility and perception management.

These methodological differences suggest that universities should adopt differentiated approaches to engagement with ranking systems based on their specific institutional profiles and development stages. As Hazelkorn [5] argues, "rankings measure what is easy to count, not necessarily what is strategically important for an

individual institution." For New Uzbekistan University and similar institutions, this observation underscores the importance of aligning ranking engagement with broader institutional development priorities rather than allowing ranking indicators to dictate strategy.

The treatment of research metrics represents a particularly significant methodological difference with strategic implications. Rauhvargers [10] has demonstrated how citation-based metrics tend to advantage certain disciplinary areas and institutional types while creating barriers for others. THE's approach divides research assessment between environment (30%) and quality (30%), placing substantial emphasis on citation impact and research influence. This approach potentially advantages institutions that can demonstrate excellence in specific research niches, even with relatively limited overall research volume. QS's more straightforward citations per faculty metric (20%) and heavier reputation weighting may create higher barriers for emerging research institutions without established reputations. Shin and Toutkoushian [11] demonstrate how these methodological differences create varied development pathways for institutions at different stages of their evolution, with particularly significant implications for universities in emerging higher education systems.

For teaching assessment, THE's multifaceted approach incorporating teaching reputation (15%) alongside more objective metrics like staff-to-student ratio contrasts with QS's simpler faculty-student ratio indicator (20%). This difference creates strategic opportunities for institutions like NUU to leverage instructional quality metrics more effectively in THE's system, while focusing on faculty recruitment and optimal student-staff ratios for QS ranking improvement.

4.2 Theoretical Understanding of Rankings and Institutional Behavior

The theoretical framework applied in this study provides deeper insight into how ranking methodologies influence institutional behavior and strategic choices. Resource Dependency Theory helps explain why universities increasingly align their strategic priorities with ranking indicators: rankings mediate access to critical resources including students, faculty, funding, and partnerships. As Marginson [9] observes, "rankings have become a form of global currency," influencing resource flows in ways that create powerful incentives for conformity to ranking criteria. This balanced perspective aligns with Marginson's [9] additional argument that 'rankings are neither to be wholly embraced nor entirely rejected,' but rather approached strategically as tools that inform—but do not dominate—institutional development.

Institutional isomorphism—the tendency of organizations in the same field to become increasingly similar over time—further illuminates ranking influence on university behavior. DiMaggio and Powell's [12] classification of isomorphic pressures is particularly relevant :

1. **Coercive isomorphism**: Evident in government policies like Uzbekistan's national higher education strategy that establishes explicit ranking targets, creating formal pressure for conformity.
2. **Mimetic isomorphism**: Observed when universities facing uncertainty about how to improve their global position imitate strategies of higher-ranked institutions, regardless of contextual fit.
3. **Normative isomorphism**: Emerges through professionalization of "ranking management" functions and the growing influence of international consultants and experts who advise on ranking improvement.

These isomorphic pressures potentially drive homogenization in higher education, as institutions with diverse missions and contexts pursue similar strategies aligned with ranking indicators. Rumbley and Altbach [13] warn that "the convergence of institutional strategies in response to rankings risks undermining the diversity that has historically characterized higher education systems," a concern particularly relevant for universities like NUU seeking to balance global competitiveness with regional relevance.

The research findings suggest that different ranking methodologies create varying isomorphic effects. THE's more comprehensive methodology may drive deeper but more complex institutional transformation across multiple dimensions, while QS's reputation-heavy approach might encourage more surface-level changes focused on visibility rather than substantive quality improvement. For institutional leaders, awareness of these isomorphic pressures is essential for maintaining strategic autonomy while engaging with ranking systems.

4.3 Strategic Considerations for Developing Institutions

For New Uzbekistan University and similar institutions in developing contexts, the research findings offer several strategic insights:

1. **Selective engagement**: Rather than attempting to improve across all ranking indicators simultaneously, developing institutions should prioritize indicators that align with core institutional priorities and offer the most accessible improvement paths. The analysis suggests that for NUU, initial focus on teaching resources metrics and international outlook indicators may offer more immediate gains than research-intensive metrics.
2. **Phased approach**: The significant gaps between developing institutions and global benchmarks necessitate a long-term, phased approach to ranking improvement. As indicated by the gap analysis framework in Table 3, institutions like NUU should establish baseline performance data, identify the smallest initial gaps, and develop targeted short-term strategies while building foundations for longer-term improvement in more challenging areas.
3. **Strategic differentiation**: While rankings create isomorphic pressures for conformity, sustainable improvement requires maintaining distinctive institutional characteristics that reflect regional context and needs. For NUU, leveraging Central Asian educational traditions and regional strengths offers a more viable path than simply imitating Western institutional models. International strategy development is particularly critical in this context, as Maringe and Foskett [14] demonstrate through their analysis of how internationalization approaches must be calibrated to institutional positioning and regional context.
4. **Balanced scorecard approach**: To prevent ranking considerations from dominating institutional priorities, developing universities should adopt a balanced scorecard approach that integrates ranking indicators within a broader performance framework that includes mission-aligned metrics not captured by ranking systems. This approach aligns with Salmi and Altbach's [15] recommendation for 'contextual excellence' that balances global metrics with local relevance.

These considerations align with Hazelkorn's [8] recommendation that institutions adopt a "strategic fit" approach to rankings that balances conformity to global benchmarks with distinctive positioning based on institutional mission and context. For New Uzbekistan University, such an approach would involve strategic selection of ranking indicators that both drive substantive improvement and enhance competitive positioning.

5. Conclusion

This comparative analysis of THE and QS ranking methodologies reveals how different approaches to measuring university quality create varied strategic implications for institutions, particularly those in developing contexts like New Uzbekistan University. THE's comprehensive evaluation across teaching, research quality, and internationalization contrasts with QS's emphasis on reputation and faculty resources, producing distinct advantages for different types of institutions.

The methodological differences identified in this study highlight several critical insights for university leaders. First, understanding the technical details of ranking

methodologies is essential for strategic planning, as seemingly minor differences in indicators and weightings can significantly affect institutional positioning. Second, different ranking systems create varied strategic imperatives that may align differently with institutional missions and developmental stages. Third, the theoretical lens of Resource Dependency and Institutional Isomorphism explains why rankings exert such powerful influence on university behavior while also revealing potential risks of excessive conformity.

For New Uzbekistan University and similar institutions in developing contexts, several practical recommendations emerge from this research:

1. **Align ranking engagement with core institutional mission**: Select ranking indicators for improvement that support broader institutional development rather than allowing ranking systems to dictate strategic priorities.
2. **Adopt differentiated strategies for different ranking systems**: Recognize that THE and QS methodologies create different strategic opportunities and challenges, and develop tailored approaches to each system.
3. **Implement a phased approach to ranking improvement**: Acknowledge the long-term nature of ranking advancement and establish realistic timeframes with sequential focus on indicators offering the most accessible initial gains.
4. **Balance global benchmarking with local relevance**: Maintain distinctive institutional identity while pursuing ranking improvement, recognizing that regional leadership may provide a more sustainable path than imitation of global models.
5. **Develop institutional research capacity**: Invest in the data management capabilities necessary for effective engagement with ranking systems, as the ability to collect, analyze, and report accurate institutional data represents a fundamental requirement for successful ranking participation.

These recommendations offer a framework for strategic engagement with ranking systems that maintains institutional autonomy while leveraging rankings as catalysts for meaningful improvement.

The limitations of this research include reliance on publicly available methodological documentation that may not fully capture proprietary aspects of ranking systems, and the contextual specificity of New Uzbekistan University's experience that may not generalize to all developing institutions.

In conclusion, effective engagement with international ranking systems requires sophisticated understanding of methodological differences and their strategic implications. For New Uzbekistan University and similar institutions, such understanding provides the foundation for approaches that leverage rankings as tools for improvement while maintaining focus on substantive educational quality and distinctive institutional character.

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