



NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES AND THE PLETHORA OF RANKINGS

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ABSTRACT

The paper examined some global university rankings and situated the performance of Nigerian universities in the league tables. It also broadly identified the criteria that impacted their performance and expressed opinions on the relevance, and appropriateness of such criteria, in the Nigerian University System as well as the capacity of Nigerian universities to compete in each of the rankings. The Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), QS World Universities Rankings (QS-WUR), Times Higher Education World Universities Rankings (THE-WUR), Times Higher Education Impact Rankings (THE-IR), Times Higher Education Sub-Saharan African Universities Rankings (THE-SSAUR), Webometric Rankings, US News Universities Rankings, and Nigerian Universities Rankings (NUR), were reviewed. The current performance of the top Nigerian universities in each of the rankings was presented and discussed. No Nigerian university appeared among the top 1000 universities in ARWU, QS-WUR, and Webometric rankings. Measures Nigerian universities can take to improve their performance in the global ranking were also discussed. Suggestions were also made regarding what the ranking agencies need to do to improve their criteria and methodology. Although Nigerian universities performed relatively well in the US News rankings, it is concluded that the THE-IR, THE-SSAUR, and NUR are the most relevant and appropriate rankings and should be fully embraced by Nigerian universities and the performance of Nigerian universities in these rankings may be used as barometers of their impact and relevance to society. Continued good performance in these rankings by Nigerian universities will serve as a stepping stone for better performance in the other rankings.

KEYWORDS: University rankings, Nigerian universities, world-class universities, university mission, internationalization, SDGs.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria currently has a total of 274 universities of which 62 are owned by the Federal Government, 63, belong to the States, and 149 are privately owned (www.nuc.edu.ng). National University rankings started informally in the USA in 1983 when the US News published a formal list of America's Best Colleges (Meredith 2004). The US News rankings have gone global in the last decade.

Global university rankings have grown in numbers and sophistication since then. There are many global rankings such as US News, Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), Times Higher Education, World University Rankings (THE-WUR), Quaquarella Symonds World University Ranking (QS-WUR), Webometric Ranking, Alper Doger Scientific Ranking, and Centre for Science and Technology Studies, Leiden Rankings. Some of them have several ranking tables in addition to the main ones.

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The Times Higher Education, for example, also has the Impact Rankings (THE-IR) and the Sub-Saharan African Universities Rankings (THE-SSAUR) among others. Nigeria has its ranking called the Nigeria Universities Rankings (NUR) being done by the Nigerian Universities Rankings Advisory Committee (NURAC) based at the National Universities Commission.

The Ranking agencies are independent organizations that operate based on their criteria crafted based on some guiding principles. Their criteria which have been the subject of various criticisms vary between the ranking organizations and have evolved over the years to address some of the criticisms and make them more objective, relevant, specific, and sensitive to what they seek to measure. By changing criteria, they address identified shortcomings and respond to new developments.

Universities are generally for Teaching, Research, and Community Service and the metrics used for ranking them should measure each of the components of the Mission Tripod to varying degrees. Most of the criteria used by the ranking agencies, however, tend to measure more of the research output of universities and to some extent the teaching component, but almost completely neglect (until recently) the Third Mission of Community Service. Lee, Vance, Stensaker, and Ghosh (2020) highlighted this issue of Third-World universities emphasizing the local economy and its problems, while the so-called world-class universities are more likely to neglect this third mission. This Third Mission is particularly important in developing countries. Bekradnia (2016) reviewed three leading rankings (ARWU, QS-WUR, and THE-WUR) and found many similarities in their criteria. Despite the similarities, however, the ranking outcomes are usually different, meaning that the similarities in the criteria and methodology are superficial. There is a preponderance of literature critiquing global university rankings, although some of them have been overtaken by changes over the years in the ranking criteria. Two of the recent critiques were published by Sayed (2019) and Saffon and Docampo (2020). Gadd (2021) highlights the “incompatibility between universities’ alignment with socially responsible practices and continued engagement with socially irresponsible ranking practices” and urges “leaders of “world-leading” universities to join together to ‘lead the world’ in challenging global university rankings and to set

their standards for thriving and maturing universities”. This call, though overdue, is likely to remain unheeded globally because it is difficult to arrive at a consensus although this is being started in Nigeria where it is the leadership of the nation’s universities that debate and adopt the criteria for ranking, with some minor dissent. Already, the highly ranked universities by the leading ranking organizations are mainly USA and UK universities that are old, well-endowed, research-intensive, highly branded, English-speaking universities and are difficult to displace and may not want to participate in changing the criteria. Other universities that cannot beat them tend more to aspire to join them as some kind of surrogates. There is a growing body of literature indicating that some universities may even be using dubious means to join the club of highly ranked universities (Gingras 2014, Calderon 2020, Kehm, 2020, Chirakov, 2021). However, in response to the criticism that the criteria used by the major ranking organizations confer some advantage to the older universities, new ranking league tables are constantly being created to segment the market. Such segments could cater to regions, subjects, or even age. The ranking agencies also modify their criteria from time to time to fine-tune them. They also do some ‘data cleaning’ to “normalize” their results and remove major discrepancies, which means that they are not impervious to criticisms.

Gadd, Holmes, and Shearer (2021) developed a set of criteria for evaluating university rankings and gave it the acronym SCOPE (S= start with what you value, C= context consideration, O= options for evaluating, P= probe deeply, and E= evaluate). The criteria fall under four categories: good governance, transparency, measuring what matters, and rigor. They evaluated six rankings using SCOPE and scored CWTS Leiden highly but rated THE-WUR and US News rankings low.

There are several existing guidelines (some of which have themselves also come under serious criticism) for rankers such as the Carnegie Classification, Leiden Classification, and the most popular being the Berlin Principles on Ranking Higher Education Institutions. The Berlin Principles cover the purposes of rankings, design, and weightings of indicators, collection, and processing of data, and results presentation (Baron 2017).

Viewed in another way, the Berlin Principles are broadly based on five key values – relevance, transparency, diversity, quality, and user content sensitivity (IREG 2021).

The CWTS Leiden also developed a Ten Point principle for responsible design, interpretation, and use of university rankings (Waltman, Wouters, and van Eck, 2017). The emergence of such guidelines is certainly a welcome development, and they will likely be increasingly used to rank the Raters.

It appears that the Global Rankings have found a niche in the Higher Education Ecosystem, so it will be difficult to supplant them. Stakeholders (staff, students, university managers, government, funding agencies) in Higher Education have come to rely on them for a variety of purposes. Global university rankings have come to be identified as hallmarks of quality and the top-ranked universities constitute the so-called “World Class Universities”. However, the criteria of the elite ranking system heavily emphasize research because it is easier to measure and is associated with more prestige. The criteria tend to downplay the two other components of the University Mission Tripod, namely Teaching and Community Service. The criteria used by the agencies should therefore be evaluated by universities for appropriateness and relevance since they are increasingly becoming benchmarks for the Higher Education system. Nigerian universities need to assess the criteria and work out legitimate strategies for improvement of Quality Assurance and gain rank.

In the 2023 ranking by ARWU (www.shanghairankings.com), one of the major raters, no Nigerian University featured in its top 1000 universities in the world. South Africa had 8 universities, Egypt had 7, while Ethiopia, Ghana, and Tunisia had 1 each. Nigerian universities, therefore, seem not to fare well even among their peers in Africa. Nigerian Universities are therefore under tremendous pressure to do whatever is ethically feasible to appear on the league tables of Global University Rankings. This pressure is

THE RANKINGS

The rankings being looked at in this paper are the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), Quarella Symonds World University Ranking (QS WUR), THE-WUR, THE-IR, THE-SSAUR, Webometric ranking, US News rankings, and the Nigerian Universities Rankings.

further compounded by the plethora of global rankings whose numbers seem to be increasing every year. This, therefore, calls for focus and determination on the part of Nigerian Universities to identify which rankings are relevant and useful to their system in their quest to gradually and incrementally climb the rungs of the global rankings tables and be reckoned with globally. As part of this effort, Nigerian universities came up with the Nigerian Universities Rankings to popularize rankings in the university system.

Currently, there is a dearth of comprehensive information on the performance of Nigerian universities in these global rankings. Okebukola (2011) examined three ranking systems (ARWU, THE WUR, and Webometric) and distilled some recommendations for Nigerian universities to adopt to improve their standing in global rankings. Anyira et al (2020) examined some of the causes of poor performance of Nigerian universities and proffered solutions. Also, Aiyedun et al., (2021) identified factors that hinder the progress of Nigerian universities on the global ranking charts, although some of the factors such as examination malpractice, poor quality elementary and secondary education, insecurity, and strikes seem to be little bit far remote from the important drivers of excellence in rankings. Agbebaku and Ajegbelen (2016) identified several criteria used by global ranking agencies as being deficient in the Nigerian University System.

This paper, therefore, seeks to look at seven global rankings and the NUR, to answer the following research questions.

1. How well are Nigerian universities performing in the global rankings league tables, especially in relation to their counterparts in Sub-Saharan Africa?
2. Which aspects of the criteria and methodologies of the global ranking agencies impact the performance of Nigerian universities?
3. What can the Nigerian universities do to improve their performance, and what can the ranking agencies change to improve the appropriateness and relevance of their criteria and methodologies globally?

The Linden Ranking was not considered in this paper because, for some reason, it is hardly mentioned in Nigeria. Also, AD Scientific uses very narrow criteria and hence was not considered.

The Academic Rankings of World Universities, also called the Shanghai Rankings (www.shanghairanking.com), is published annually since 2003 and is one of the elite global university ranking systems. It was created to enable comparison of Chinese universities to their Western counterparts and monitor their transformation to 'World Class' status (Liu and Cheng 2005). They obtain their data from independent websites and national agencies without contacting the universities. Their top highly ranked universities are mostly from the USA and UK. The current criteria being used by the Shanghai Rankings consist of four main areas viz, Quality of Education (10%), Quality of Faculty (40%), Research Output (40%), and Per Capita Performance (10%). The alumni of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Field Medals are used as indicators for Quality of Education and sourced from www.nobelprize.org. For the quality of Faculty, the indicators used are staff of an institution winning the Nobel Prize and Field Medal (sourced from www.mathunion.org) and Highly cited Researchers (sourced from Clarivate <https://clarivate.com/>) with 20% for each of them. The Research Output criterion has two indicators (20% each), which are papers published in Nature and Science, which are relocated to other indicators for institutions specializing in humanities and social sciences, and papers indexed in Science Citation Index-expanded and Social Science Citation Index. The two indicators are sourced from Web of Science www.webofscience.com/. The Per Capita Academic performance of an institution is obtained from National Sources such as ministries and agencies.

The QS World University Rankings, (www.topuniversities.com) has been in place for about 20 years, and its criteria have evolved over the years. The new criteria for 2024 consist of 9 Performance Lenses, which are Academic Reputation (30%), Employer Reputation (15%), Faculty Student Ratio (10%), and Citations per Faculty (20%). The remaining 5 performances carry a mark of 5% each and are the International Faculty Ratio, International Student Ratio, International Research Network, Employer Outcomes, and Sustainability. The 2024 criteria and weights differ remarkably from those of 2023. The Times Higher Education World University Rankings' 13 performance indicators are grouped into five areas:

Teaching (the learning environment) 29.5% (Teaching reputation 15%, Staff to student ratio 4.5% Doctorate to bachelor's ratio 2% Doctorate awarded to academic staff ratio 5.5% and institutional income 2.5%); Research environment 29% (research reputation 18%, research income 5.5% and research productivity 5.5%); Research quality 30% (citation impact 15%, research strength 5% research excellence 5% and research influence 5%); International outlook 7.5% (proportion of international students 2.5%, proportion of international staff 2.5% and international collaboration 2.5%); and Industry 4% (industry income 2% and patents 2%). (www.timeshighereducation.com). The THE-IR (www.timeshighereducation.com/impactrankings) evaluates universities' success in delivering the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals using four broad areas of research, stewardship, outreach, and teaching, to essentially measure how a University uses research to help in delivering the SDGs, use their human and material resources for the stewardship of the SDGs; the work that universities do with their communities on the SDGs as well as how their teaching work impacts the SDGs. Universities can submit data on as many of the SDGs as they are able. Each SDG has a series of metrics that are used to evaluate the performance of the university in that SDG. Any university that provides data on SDG 17 and at least three other SDGs is included in the overall ranking. A university's total score in a given year is calculated by combining its score in SDG 17 with its best three results on the remaining 16 SDGs. SDG 17 accounts for 22 percent of the total score, while the other SDGs each carry a weighting of 26 percent. This means that different universities are scored based on a different set of SDGs, depending on their focus. The score for the overall ranking is an average of the last two years' total scores.

The Times Higher Education, Sub-Saharan Africa University Rankings (www.timeshighereducation.com/) was first released in June 2023 and was developed specifically to address the challenges faced by higher education institutions in sub-Saharan Africa. Its methodology explores five pillars of equal weight (20% each). The pillars are Resources and finances, Access and fairness, Teaching skills, Student engagement, and African impact.

The criteria were modified for the 2024 edition which will be released in November featuring 129 universities.

The Ranking Web or Webometrics is the largest and one of the oldest ranking systems that relies on the web visibility of universities (<https://www.webometrics.info>). This ranking covers all universities that have a web presence using webometric (all missions) and bibliometric (research mission) indicators. Web indicators are used as proxies for evaluating activities, outputs, relevance, and impact of universities (Aguillo, Ortega, and Fernandez 2008). Their objective is not to evaluate the websites of universities in terms of their design, usability, and popularity. They aim to promote open access to the knowledge generated by universities. Data is collected between the 1-20th of January and July, and the result is released at the end of the corresponding month. The current criteria are made of three indicators only, namely, Visibility or web content impact using Ahrefs Majestic (50%), Transparency or openness ie, top-cited researchers from Google Scholar Profiles (10%), and Scholar Excellence from Scimago (40%). The number of external networks (subnets) linking to the institutions' web pages is used for measuring visibility, while the number of citations from the top 310 authors, excluding the top 30 outliers, is used for rating transparency. Scholar Excellence is measured by the number of papers among the top 10% most cited in each of all 27 disciplines of the full database for the period of the last five years. The indicator, Presence (public knowledge shared), has been discontinued.

US News rankings are powered by Clarivate (www.usnews.com). They have been ranking US universities for nearly forty years and have gone global in the last decade. The annual U.S. News & World Report rankings provide insight into how universities compare globally. There are 12 indicators used in the ranking. The scores for the indicators are Global research reputation 12.5%, Regional research reputation 12.5%, Publications 10%, Books 2.5%, Conferences 2.5%, Normalized citation impact 10%, Total citations 7.5%, Number of publications that are among the top 10% most cited 12.5%, and Percentage of total publications that are among the 10% most cited 10%. The remaining four indicators are assigned a weight of 5% each. The indicators are international collaboration relative to country; International collaboration; Number of highly cited papers that

are among the top 1% most cited in their respective field, and the percentage of total publications that are among the top 1% most highly cited papers. Results from Clarivate's survey databases are aggregated for the most recent five years to create the two reputation indicators (a total of 25%) used in U.S. News.

The resumed (after about 2 decades in abeyance) Nigerian University Rankings (<https://nusrankings.ng>) being carried out by NURAC is now in its second year after the release of the new 'maiden' edition.

When the new edition was released, it generated a lot of excitement and some criticisms. The second edition addressed most of the issues raised. The second edition uses 16 indicators/metrics as follows.

- i. Percentage of international students
- ii. Percentage of international staff
- iii. Percentage of female enrolment
- iv. Percentage of academic programs of the University with full accreditation status
- v. Percentage of academic staff of the university at full professorial level
- vi. Percentage of academic staff with PhDs
- vii. Percentage of students outside the state where the university is located
- viii. Percentage of academic staff outside the state where the university is located
- ix. Percentage of students with on-campus accommodation
- x. Efficiency (students' completion rate for 4 and 5-year degree programs
- xi. I10 index for the previous five years
- xii. Transparent Ranking/Top universities by citations in the Top Google Scholar Profiles
- xiii. Teaching quality (from accreditation data)
- xiv. Quality of infrastructure (from accreditation data)
- xv. Community service
- xvi. Reputation.

The criteria were arrived at, at meetings of Directors of Academic Planning and Vice-Chancellors, and can therefore be considered a homegrown consensus, except for minor dissenting voices in line with the suggestions by Gadd (2021). The ranking promises to address the deficiencies of the existing global rankings as well as introduce elements that are unique to Nigeria while maintaining the universality of Nigerian universities. Now, most of the data is being supplied by the universities.

I envisage that, shortly, universities will be encouraged to put such data on their websites for them to be mined by NURAC using powerful search engines and other statistical tools.

NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES IN GLOBAL RANKINGS

The performance of Nigerian universities in the most recent global rankings by ARWU, QSWUR, THE-WUR, THE IR, THE-SSAUR, Webometric, and the US News, are narrated or tabulated and discussed. The overall performance of Nigerian

Universities in the seven global rankings are presented in Table 1.

In the 2024 ARWU rankings, no Nigerian University appeared in the top 1000 universities in the World. Eighteen African universities were, however, listed. In its 2022 rankings, the University of Ibadan, which is the oldest university in Nigeria, appeared in the 801-900 band. In contrast, 8 South African universities were listed among the top 1000, with the University of Cape Town leading the way in the 201-300 band.

In the 2025 QS-WUR ranking, the University of Cape Town and nine other South African universities were listed among the top 1000 again, without any Nigerian university in that group (source www.topuniversities.com).

Table 1. Overall performance of Nigerian Universities in the Global Universities Ranking Tables (Top 1000)

Serial Number	Ranking Agency	Number of Nigerian Universities in the top 1000	Best Nigerian University and Rank	Best Subsaharan African University and Rank
1	Academic Ranking of World Universities (2024)	00	00	University of Cape Town 201-300
2	QS World Universities Ranking (2025)	00	University of Ibadan and University of Lagos 1001-1200	University of Cape Town 171
3	Times Higher Education World Universities Ranking (2024)	01	Covenant University 801-1000	University of Cape Town 180
4	Times Higher Education Impact Ranking (2024)	06	Afe Babalola University 100-200	University of Johannesburg 36
5	Times Higher Education Subsaharan African Universities Ranking (2023)	NA	Covenant University 7	University of Witwatersrand 1
6	Webometric Rankings (June 2024)	00	University of Ibadan 1177	University of Cape Town 255
7	US News (2024-2025)	03	University of Lagos 323	University of Cape Town 70

The THE-WUR 2025 has only one Nigerian University in the top 1000 universities in the World, as shown in Table 2. Ten others appeared between the 1000 to 1500 bands. Again, the

University of Cape Town (no. 180) and seven other South African universities were in the top 1000 group.

Table 2: Best Performing Universities in 2025, Times Higher Education World University Ranking.

Rank	Name of University	No. of FTE Students	No. of students per staff	International Students	Female: Male Ratio
801-1000	Covenant University	8,542	17.0	0%	41:59
1001-1200	Ahmadu Bello University	49,531	16.6	0%	37:63
1001-1200	Landmark University	3,243	14.5	0%	33:67
1001-1200	University of Ibadan	37,598	17.9	1%	51:49
1001-1200	University of Lagos	40,197	24.4	0%	50:50
1201-1500	Bayero University	37,377	22.3	0%	37:63
1201-1500	Federal University of Technology Akure	19,186	21.9	0%	27:73
1201-1500	Federal University of Technology Minna	25,004	23.6	0%	24:76
1201-1500	University of Benin	44,140	24.1	0%	50:50
1201-1500	University of Ilorin	48,837	36.3	0%	48:52
1201-1500	University of Nigeria Nsukka	43,168	11.4	1%	46:54

Source: www.timeshighereducation.com

The THE-IR for 2024 featured many Sub-Saharan African universities being led by the University of Johannesburg at number 36. Nigerian universities were led by Afe Babalola (100-200) and Covenant

University (401-600), both of them young and private universities. Four other Nigerian universities are in the top 1000 (see Table 3).

Table 3. Best Performing Nigerian Universities in the 2024 THE Impact Rankings.

Rank	Name	Best Scores by Rank	Overall
101-200	Afe Babalola University	7(85.0) 1(83.6) 13(60.9) 17 (84.8-90.0)	84.0-89.1
401-600	Covenant University	16(72.7-79.6) 7 (63.4-69.1) 12 (65.6-73.0) 17 (92.1)	66.9-75.7
801-1000	American University of Nigeria	16(67.0-72.6) 1 (62.4-69.6) 7 (33.5-46.3) 17 (52.9-59.7)	58.8-64.4
801-1000	Federal University of Agriculture Abeokuta	4(62.1-65.6) 2 (54.4-61.5) 13 (53.5-60.6) 17 (52.9-59.7)	58.8-64.4
801-1000	Lagos State University	4(65.7-69.2) 5(48.2-55.2) 1 (57.0-62.3) 17 (59.9-67.4)	58.8-64.4
801-1000	Landmark University	7(69.3) 4(65.7-69.2) 12 (65.6-73.0) 17 (36.9-52.8)	58.8-64.4

Source: www.timeshighereducation.com/impactrankings

The THE-SSAUR (Table 4) features Covenant University as number 7 in Africa and number 1 in Nigeria, with the second Nigerian university (Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta)

being number 26 in Africa. Ten other Nigerian universities appeared among the top 50 on the table.

Table 4: Top 12 Nigerian Universities in the Maiden Edition (2023) Sub-Saharan Universities Rankings

Rank	University	Overall Score	Resources and finance	Access and fairness	Teaching Skills	Student engagement	Africa impact
7	Covenant University	70.0	76.3	42.6-44.7	71.6	76.6	82.0
26	Federal Univ. of Agriculture, Abeokuta	60	66.7	42.6-44.7	79.0	57.1-59.3	51.9
30	Benson Idahosa University	57.8	67.5	39.7-42.4	84.9	70.2	0.0-30.3
=31	Nnamdi Azikwe University	57.6	48.4-53.1	54.9	72.6	52.2-56.5	54.2
35	Redeemer's University	54.6	53.5	31.6-39.3	50.9-53.7	82.7	45.0
36	University of Ibadan	54.4	36.0-43.3	31.6-39.3	57.8	77.4	68.3
37	Cross Rivers Univ. of Tech.	54.2	67.3	3.0-30.9	85.3	77.4	0.0-30.3
=39	Obafemi Awolowo University	52.7	55.6	3.0-30.9	50.9-53.7	71.0	59.5
43	Umaru Musa Yar'adua University	51.6	56.3	3.0-30.9	80.7	64.0	30.8-36.4
45	Adeleke University	50.9	57.7	39.7-42.4	57.8	64.5	30.8-36.4
46	Ahmadu Bello University	50.8	64.6	3.0-30.9	71.2	57.159.3	40.6-44.0
47	University of Benin	50.5	36.0-43.3	62.3	38.1-47.8	62.1	36.5-40.2

Source: www.timeshighereducation.com/sub-saharan-africa-university-rankings#!/

The Webometric Ranking of Universities for June 2024 has the University of Ibadan as number 1 in Nigeria, 14 in Africa, and number 1177 in the World, as shown in Table 5, where the top 10

Nigerian universities are listed. Many other Nigerian universities appeared on this ranking since their methodology captures over 30,000 universities.

Table 5. The top 10 highest-ranked Nigerian Universities in the June 2024 Webometric rankings.

Ranking	World Rank	University	Impact Rank	Openness Rank	Excellence Rank
1	1177	University of Ibadan	2652	755	1117
2	1253	University of Lagos	1802	1052	1581
3	1314	University of Nigeria	3426	901	1177
4	1527	University of Port Harcourt	826	1520	3200
5	1586	Covenant University, Ota	3056	1289	1725
6	1659	Obafemi Awolowo University	3293	1083	1881
7	1994	Federal University of Technology Akure	6070	1205	1619
8	2178	Ladoke Akintola University	3973	1421	1573
9	2271	Federal University of Technology Akure	6142	1329	2071
10	2332	Landmark University	5616	2187	2132

Source: www.topuniversities.com

The US News ranking extract in Table 6 shows the University of Lagos as number 1 in Nigeria, 5 in Africa, and 323 in the World with a score of 59.5.

Two other Nigerian universities are on the table among the top 1000.

Table 6: Global U. S. News Rankings for 2024/2025 for Nigerian Universities within the top 1000, culled from www.usnews.com

S/No.	University	Global Rank	Score
1	University of Lagos	323	59.5
2	University of Ibadan	357	58.7
3	Ahmadu Bello University	573	52.1

DISCUSSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Since they were first introduced, the global university rankings have continued to receive mixed reactions from within and outside the universities. The reactions range from virulent criticisms of several aspects of the rankings to wholesale acceptance with minor misgivings. Whatever the reactions, it is highly unlikely that rankings will fizzle away. Contrary to that, they seem to be growing in numbers and sophistication. So, it is safe to say that rankings have carved a niche for themselves in the global Higher Education Ecosystem, and universities should embrace them and where necessary suggest ways and means of improving them to make them more relevant, objective, efficient, and a good measure of all aspects of the mission of universities.

There are no studies that situate Nigerian universities on the global ranking tables to give a holistic view of their position. With 274 universities (www.nuc.edu.ng) Nigeria has the largest number of universities in Africa. It is therefore imperative for us to know where our universities stand in order to properly chart the way forward. This study seeks to address this issue. The study will also identify the common threads in the ranking agencies' criteria and methodologies that can impact Nigerian universities' performance to identify issues that need to be addressed by both Nigerian universities and the ranking agencies.

As can be seen from the extracts derived from the current ranking tables in Table 1, no Nigerian university features in the top 1000 best universities in ARWU, QS-WUR, Webometric rankings, and only one university appeared in the THE-WUR and three in the US News ranking. This is an abysmal performance. In contrast, South African universities appear in the top 1000 of all the above-mentioned rankings, sometimes with as many as ten of them.

ARWU, QS-WUR, THE-WUR, and Webometric rankings all assign more weight to the research component of the university mandate in assessing

excellence. It is therefore obvious that since these agencies assign more than 50% of their weight to the research component, any university not doing well in research cannot expect to perform well on their league tables. Earlier studies have also identified this emphasis on research (Liu and Cheng 2005, Vernon et al 2018). It is therefore safe to conclude that Nigerian universities are lagging in carrying out quality research, and this impacts their position in global rankings.

Specifically, ARWU, which is probably the most elitist of the big four (ARWU, QS-WUR, THE-WUR, and Webometric rankings), favors the old, research-intensive, so-called world-class and English-speaking universities in the US and Europe. The top 10 universities in its rankings are usually from the USA and UK. In a detailed analysis of 2004-2016 ARWU ranking tables, Docampo, Egret, and Cram (2022), posited that exogenous or methodological changes that are not inherent to the institution have often resulted in altered performance on the league tables. Relative to other ranking tables studied, however, the ARWU does not display marked variability. This was also the view of Hou and Jacob (2017). Of its criteria, 30% is allocated to alumni and staff of the institution who have won Nobel Prizes and Field Medals. Nigerian universities are already disadvantaged by these criteria. In the Nigerian University System, there is only one Nobel Prize Laureate. Another 20% is allocated to publications, mainly in Nature and Science, which are highly competitive journals. For articles to appear in such journals, a university requires a well-equipped and reputable laboratory, though, some considerations are given for those in social sciences. Another 20% of the criteria is for highly cited researchers using Clarivate, and 20% for papers published in journals indexed in the Science Citation Index using Web of Science. These journal indexing platforms so far seem not to favour third-world countries. So far, ARWU criteria favour research-intensive universities with little direct measure of teaching

and community engagement. The number of universities with Nobel laureates is few and far between, and therefore, this is not a suitable criterion on a global scale. Rather, the ripple effects of, or other ways of measuring the impact of the findings that led to the award of the Nobel prize, should be explored, or the weight attached to the metric should be downplayed. These criteria are, however, objective for what they measure. ARWU gets its data directly from independent sources, and this covers 90% of the criteria. Only the remaining 10% for the per capita academic performance of an institution do they rely on National sources, whose quality varies from country to country. It is therefore obvious that for our not-so-well-equipped universities with relatively less well-endowed human capital, Nigerian universities do not do well in this ranking system. So far, only the University of Ibadan, the oldest and most research-endowed university in the country, appeared in the 800-900 band of the 2022 ranking. Other universities like the Obafemi Awolowo University, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, and the relatively younger and very aggressive Federal University of Agriculture Abeokuta appeared in the subject rankings. This is a good development that can be improved upon with time.

The QS World University Ranking is another member of the 'Big Four'. For the 2024 edition, 30% of the criteria is allocated to academic reputation, down by 10% from previous editions. Also, 15% is allocated to employer reputation. Both academic and employer reputations depend on surveys carried out annually. To allocate a total of 45 marks to criteria based on surveys seems to place too much emphasis on subjective criteria. Surveys have many shortcomings; the people surveyed are simply not of vast knowledge in terms of discipline, universities, and regions. Their selection and opinion may therefore be biased and in some cases may be compromised. Reputation surveys are invariably measuring the brand of the university (Selten., et al 2019, Ross, 2021). Thus, older universities with a reputation/brand are difficult to displace. The oldest Nigerian university was established in 1947. Surveys should therefore be minimized to make the ranking more reliable. QS-WUR has some criteria aimed at measuring teaching. This includes to a large extent, the Faculty-Student ratio, and to a lesser extent international Faculty ratio, international-student ratio, and employment outcomes. Although these

are not wholly appropriate proxies for measuring the quality of teaching, this is a marked deviation from the ARWU, which concentrates mainly on research outcomes. QS-WUR also allocates 20% to citations per Faculty and 5% to international research networks. QS-WUR has also introduced sustainability for its 2024 rankings and allocated 5% to it. Sustainability is key, and this is something Nigerian universities must be worried about, especially the new private universities that were recently created. Review of university rankings (Taylor and Braddock 2007, Saisana, d'Hombres and Saltelli 2011, Moed 2017) found that emphasis on reputation and institutional resources may not represent university quality. The emphasis on research indicators and the use of surveys by this ranking agency negatively impact the performance of Nigerian universities.

The Times Higher Education World University Ranking has a fairly more balanced set of criteria (Baty 2015) among the elite ranking agencies, and this has evolved over the years. Its criteria are spread across five areas, viz teaching (the learning environment), research volume, income and reputation, citations to measure research influence, international outlook regarding staff, students, and research finally industry income. This offers Nigerian universities the chance to compete globally more equitably. It should, however, downplay the use of reputation surveys because reputation is a subjective and iniquitous concept.

The University of Ibadan, University of Nigeria, Ahmadu Bello University, Obafemi Awolowo University, University of Lagos, and the University of Benin being the oldest universities with many senior academics should as a matter of policy be transformed into Research and Postgraduate universities to mint PhDs (by removing all obstacles to PhD studies) and solve national problems through diligent research and should be so supported by the Federal Government of Nigeria being their proprietor. The carrying of quality research on issues that are of national importance with global relevance and publishing the findings in reputable journals is key to climbing the rungs of the ranking ladders of the global ranking agencies. This is of paramount importance and university managers should adopt measures to ensure that it happens. This should particularly be the major preoccupation of these universities. Of course, others who feel competent can join this research university group.

The encouragement of staff to carry out good quality research, which can be done in several ways, publication of findings in indexed journals, and registration with Google Scholar should be common policies in Nigerian universities since this is a very basic requirement for most rankings.

This is therefore the fulcrum for advancement on the rungs of rankings. It also begs the question, what should be the basis for assigning weights to the metrics used in ranking? The aspiration of many universities is to be seen as Research universities, so to that extent, it is fair to assign more weightage to research than teaching and community engagement, but the key is to make all of the Mission Tripod count.

Okebukola (2011) x-rayed ARWU, THE-WUR, and Webometric rankings and came up with many recommendations for Nigerian universities to adopt to catch up with the rest of the world on these rankings. I am confident that Nigerian universities have since plucked some of the low-hanging fruits identified, hence the improvement in ranking positions since 2011. Aiyedun, Olatunde-Aiyedun, and Ogunode (2021) identified many factors hindering the progress of Nigerian Universities in the Global Ranking of universities, including a poor operating environment, an obsolete educational system, inadequate infrastructure, and frequent strike actions, among others. They suggested improved funding for teaching and research facilities, improved remuneration for teachers, as well as some non-academic measures. However, from the findings of this survey, it is obvious that Nigerian universities are underperforming in research-related indicators used by the ranking agencies. Therefore, to significantly improve our performance, the major emphasis should be on improving research performance, quality, and output in our universities, whatever measures it takes.

Nigerian universities performed slightly better in the THE-IR (table 3) with six universities appearing among the top 1000 universities in the 2024 edition. This is quite encouraging, though not the best result for sub-Saharan Africa. Although Bautista-Puig, Ordena-Malea, and Perez-Esparvells (2022) found “severe inconsistencies” in the THE-IR methodology, this ranking offers us an important concept for measuring university impact on society. Of the six Nigerian universities in the top 1000 of this ranking, four of them are private universities with fewer senior academics

than the older, Federal government-owned universities, one of them, specifically the American University of Nigeria, identifies itself as the first Development university in Africa.

One area that needs improvement is the narrowing of the rankings to the best SDGs, plus SDG 17 submitted by universities. This gives the impression that universities are being ranked based on different criteria because the SDGs are not the same; in fact, some universities have been ranked on different SDGs over the years. It is easier to make an impact on some SDGs than others, depending on where you are. The THE-IR should be based on all 17 SDGs without conflating them. The THE-IR is probably the most useful and appropriate ranking system for third-world countries. Nigerian universities should fully embrace this ranking and strive to rise in the league table. The SDGs are a global consensus on the pressing issues for humanity and most of them apply more to the global south, especially the first 10 SDGs. How Nigerian universities impact their communities, and the country at large is of paramount importance because universities are in the best position to solve Nigeria’s problems. They should prioritize this national imperative rather than strive to “belong” to the universities in the developed countries, who, though face issues common to humanity such as climate change, are less directly concerned with many of the issues such as poverty, poor quality education, ill-health that bedevils communities surrounding the third-world universities. Yet many of these problems are amenable to easy solutions and, therefore, universities can easily impact society on these indices.

THE-SAUR is an excellent development. It removes all allegations of comparing mangoes and guavas in the global rankings for African universities. No Nigerian university should complain about being compared with another university in Sub-Saharan Africa. The six oldest Nigerian universities were given a run for their money in the maiden edition of the SSAUR. The University of Ibadan came in at a distant number 6 among Nigerian universities listed and number 36 in Africa (see Table 4). The first edition was released in June 2023, and this ranking system promises to be one that every Vice-Chancellor should be anxiously waiting for. 65% of the data used in ranking universities is supplied by the universities concerned, and 21% is based on student surveys. Going forward, universities should also be required to place such data in one

form or the other on their websites for cross-checking and whistleblowing purposes. University rankings are susceptible to gaming (Calderon, 2020, Kehm 2020, Chirakov 2021), and so the agencies should adopt measures to frustrate any such efforts.

The need to improve advocacy for this ranking cannot be overemphasized because only 88 universities appeared in the 2023 edition and only 129 will appear in the 2024 edition (www.timeshighereducation.com). This amounts to less than half of even Nigerian universities.

Universities as vanguards of transparency and accountability should have no difficulty placing their staff and student statistics, sources and application of funds, staff and student union matters, community engagement, and research endeavors on their websites. This ranking de-emphasizes research and relies too much on information supplied by universities (65%) and student surveys (21%). The research and publication component needs to be raised from 14% to about 30% to encourage Sub-Saharan universities to solve local problems as well as join the rest of the world in the knowledge-creation endeavor. Also, the African collaboration should be changed to international collaboration (including neighboring and distant countries from other continents) since this is where we are all headed to. The metrics used for this ranking are all relevant and many of them can be placed on the website to obviate the need for submission of data by universities or students (identified by the university) survey which may not be too reliable. The metrics are also issues that Nigerian universities are familiar with and are on the front burner.

The Webometric ranking of universities (sometimes called Transparent Ranking) used to be the most popular among Nigerian universities when it was introduced, but despite the keen interest, the best performing Nigerian University in the June 2024 edition (table 5) was the University of Ibadan standing at number 1177 globally and number 14 in Africa. The Webometric Ranking prides itself on an objective ranking system that does not rely on surveys or submissions from universities but on web search/link analysis. The link analysis used by this ranking may be more powerful and objective than using citation analysis or surveys, but is more likely to yield false positive results and may be more susceptible to gaming.

They do not just measure research output but in some indirect ways, teaching and community service using link analysis to evaluate the volume, contents, and impact of universities (Aguillo, Ortega and Fernandez (2008). Anyira and Idubor (2020) identified factors responsible for the poor Webometric ranking of Nigerian universities and recommended possible solutions for improving the situation. Their recommendations included: formulation and implementation of good web policy, increasing web visibility, increasing the size of the web content, uploading of documents in rich file formats, and improving scholarly research endeavors.

The Webometric ranking, like AD Scientific ranking systems, seems to be esoteric with not much tangible data, but seems to be relying more on the impact and 'noise' made by universities and scientists on the web. The Webometric ranking methodology is, however, the approach of the future because it entirely derives its data from the internet, and Nigerian universities should firmly establish a web presence by putting their publications and activities on the World Wide Web.

The US News seems to have the most balanced criteria and even includes books and conferences, which can be more important than publications in some disciplines. Their rankings, therefore, are more likely to have more validity and reliability. The rankings recently received some criticism from some universities in the USA who refused to participate but they are widely used by academics to identify good working places and especially prospective students to guide their choice of universities and the US News places a premium on this. Many of the universities they rank in the USA charge Tuition Fees of over \$50,000 per annum. This is extremely high by Nigerian standards and can easily fund the annual budget of a small department in a university in Nigeria. Access to funds with appropriate purchasing power parity should also be an important criterion for ranking since we operate in a global village. The relatively lower investment in our universities could also explain the low performance of our universities in these global rankings, although Nigerian universities performed better in the US News ranking with three universities appearing in the top 1000 (Table 6). Gadd et al (2021) rated this ranking agency low in their evaluation of 6 rankings.

The NUR promises to evolve into a model for other countries to follow at the national level and globally in terms of the guiding principles. The consensus-building approach to its criteria formulation, measuring what matters and is relevant, are some of its strong points. The ranking tables can also be viewed from several angles eg, ownership of the university, age, metrics, etc, hence almost everybody is a winner. It should also evolve as a source of useful information for prospective university students, staff, and other stakeholders. As can be seen so far, Nigerian Universities generally performed lower than their South African and Egyptian counterparts in the global rankings. They are not among the top ten African universities, except in the new THE-SSAUR, where Covenant University came in at number 7 among Sub-Saharan universities. Following a survey of Nigerian academics in various universities, Agbebaku and Ajegbelen (2016) identified incessant strikes by teachers, inadequate funding, lack of facilities and equipment, poor staff-to-student ratio, and low numbers of foreign personnel, among others, as the reasons for the low rankings of Nigerian universities. These can easily be addressed and are being addressed.

Rankings should drive good behavior among universities and the ranking agencies should insist on ranking only those universities that have the requisite information on their websites and the internet. By insisting on that rather than obtaining the information through surveys and submissions by universities, they will encourage whistleblowers to help in identifying false data or cross-checking by the ranking agencies. Data availability and openness are key ingredients of Academic Freedom. Universities should make their data freely available as much as possible and widely publicize their activities. Their websites should be data-rich and should contain all the information needed by ranking agencies. Universities should be the bastions of freedom of information, especially through appropriate web policies, and personify transparency and accountability. This requires that they should fully embrace ICT in all their activities.

The updating of criteria is essential for keeping up with the changing landscape of universities or to be more precise in what is being measured. Universities sometimes rise or fall by a wide margin within a year because of such changes, and ranking agencies come under severe criticism

from those adversely affected by it while those who benefit from it usually welcome it. Ranking agencies should update their criteria in favor of more objective, easily measurable, and fit-for-purpose criteria. This is also the view of Vernon, Balas, and Momani (2018), who suggested that future efforts should better explore measurements of university research performance through comprehensive and standardized indicators.

Measuring the teaching component is quite tricky. Surveys are subject to bias and manipulations; staff and student ratios are good but simplistic, using web presence for those doing face-to-face learning is not too reliable, and web surveys generally are subject to noise. Yet measuring teaching quality is of paramount importance. Ranking agencies should therefore strive to improve the reliability of the methods used in measuring teaching quality. Measuring employability, for example, as is carried out by QS-WUR and THE-SSAUR, is good but difficult because most of what is currently being measured has to do with the reputation of the university. Employability may also depend on several other factors, such as the students' attitude, skills possessed, government policies, policies of the industries, and the general operating environment. Therefore, employability cannot be a suitable proxy for measuring globally the teaching component of the mission of universities. The NUR attempts to deal with the problem of measuring teaching quality by using outcomes of student surveys, which are part of the Quality Assurance practices and gleaned from the accreditation data. This may not, however, be applicable globally.

Nigerian universities should charge their Academic Planning Committees to constantly review the criteria used by the major ranking agencies and identify those criteria that are synonymous with the improvement of quality and work towards identifying ways and means of attaining the goals and incorporating the criteria in their teaching, research and community service endeavors. The THE-WUR, THE-IR, THE-SSAUR, and the NUR should particularly be given full attention because their criteria are, in the main, relevant and appropriate for our situation, and success in them will positively rub off on other rankings.

Olcay and Bulu (2017) in their review of university rankings noted that variability exists among

ranking indexes, even in measuring the same criterion; correlation highlights significant differences among university rankings, and there was a lack of instruments measuring the industry income in almost all the indices examined. Their first assertion was also supported by the findings of Moed (2017) that only 35 universities featured consistently among the top 100 universities in the five university rankings they reviewed. Baron (2017), however, argues that despite the dissonance between ranking and academic evaluation, there is still enough similarity that choosing to adopt rankings as a strategy to distinguish one's institution can be regarded as a legitimate option for universities.

Some ranking agencies reward the presence of foreign staff and students, and rightly so. This is quite appropriate because universities are supposed to be diverse institutions, not local in terms of staff and student composition. Table 2 shows that the best Nigerian universities have no more than 1% foreign students. This means that they largely serve local students and do not have the benefits of diversity. Nigerian universities need to devise ways and means of not just attracting foreign staff and students but embracing internationalization in all its ramifications and working towards removing all obstacles negating it.

Given the many criticisms ranking agencies face, there is a need to have independent bodies to audit the ranking organizations using powerful and objective statistical packages that can enable them to peer into the bowels of the ranking organizations, thereby serving as ombudsmen and helping the ranking agencies fine-tune their criteria. Of course, both the ranking organizations and the Auditors should remain independent organizations.

Global rankings of universities have become an uncontested norm in the higher education Ecosystem. Universities by tradition, are comfortable with peer reviews, accreditations, and other external quality assurance oversight and should therefore have no difficulty in accommodating rankings. Nigerian Universities should therefore redouble their effort to compete with their global and African peers by adopting quality Assurance measures needed to enable them to rise on the various ranking scales and increase their global influence.

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