

# Ranking Pressures and Strategic Responses: Examining the Influence of Global University Rankings on Higher Education Governance

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**Abstract**—This study examines ranking pressures and strategic responses to global university rankings in the context of higher education governance in the Kurdistan Region. A descriptive-analytical approach was adopted, in which variables were defined and their relationships and impacts analyzed, the research was conducted in both public and private universities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. To achieve the research objectives, a questionnaire was designed to gather field data and was administered to a random sample of academic leaders. A total of 475 valid questionnaires were collected and analyzed. Data were statistically analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. The findings reveal that global university rankings significantly influence higher education governance in the Kurdistan Region, with institutions adjusting their policies and structures to meet ranking pressures. Ranking considerations and governance reforms are closely correlated, and rankings play a central role in shaping decision-making processes. Finally, the study recommends that universities establish strong relations with major international universities and institutions. Such partnerships may include student and faculty exchange programs as well as joint research initiatives.

**Keywords**—Global rankings, Kurdistan, Strategic response, University governance.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The effects of global rankings on university governance are varied; they compel universities to focus on meeting specific standards to improve their rankings. There has been notable growth in the participation of Kurdistan Region universities in global rankings, with some achieving high positions in Iraq and, in certain cases, among Arab countries and the wider region. This development indicates that the government and higher education institutions in the region are striving to enhance educational standards, scientific research, and recognition on a global scale. Participation in global rankings reflects the quality of education and research at these universities. It helps in the improvement of the academic image, drawing in investment and financing, promoting international collaboration, and improving the quality of university education. The following are the objectives of the study: (1) Determine the key pressure of international university ranking on Kurdistan Region universities. (2) Know the strategic responses embraced by the universities in the area to counter these pressures.

(3) Assess the effect of the responses on different areas of academic and administrative governance. (4) Offer advice to universities and government agencies regarding how to relate to international rankings in a manner that does not harm the aims of education, as well as the national objectives.

The significance of the study to policy and institutional leaders includes: (1) The study will add to the body of knowledge regarding the role of international university rankings on the policies and strategies used by the universities in the Kurdistan Region, especially concerning the aspect of governance, to enable the decision-makers to take actions aimed at improving the quality of higher education. (2) The study evaluates the strategic responses adopted by universities to cope with ranking pressures, offering insights into how other institutions can develop effective strategies within the Kurdistan Region context. (3) An analysis of the weaknesses and strengths of the present governance system as part of the study findings could assist in coming up with strategies to enhance the quality of higher education. The set of the main research questions the investigation will be directed at is as follows: (1) Which approaches to the global ranking pressures

do Universities in the Kurdistan Region use? (2) What are the implications of these priorities in higher education ranking criteria on such areas of the institution as funding, teaching, scientific research, and community involvement? (3) What are the issues and opportunities of higher education governance in the Kurdistan Region due to strive after better rankings?

The paper is structured into six sections: The first is the introduction, the second covers the literature review, the third presents the methodological framework, the fourth provides the results, the fifth discusses the findings, and the sixth offers the conclusion and recommendations for higher education and research institutions in the Kurdistan Region, particularly public and private universities.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Global University Rankings

Global university rankings, including the QS World University Rankings, Times Higher Education, and the Academic Ranking of World Universities, have been central to the development of perceptions of quality and performance by universities. These rankings take into account such metrics as the research output, teaching reputation, international orientation, and income of the industry. Although widely used, critics argue that rankings favor research-intensive universities in the Global North, oversimplify complex educational missions, and encourage institutions to conform to global standards (Hazelkorn, 2021; Marginson, 2020; Dill and Soo, 2020). They disregard, frequently, contextual diversity and institutional missions based on teaching or regional development. Consequently, rankings affect behavior in terms of greater emphasis on internationalization, strategic recruitment, and benchmarking practices (Shin and Toutkoushian, 2020).

### B. Higher Education Governance

Higher education is undergoing a transformation from traditional state-based governance toward market-based systems or hybrid governance models. Market-based approach focuses on independence, competition, and funding based on performance, whereas the hybrid model focuses on equilibrium between the state and institutional freedom (Bleiklie and Michelsen, 2022). Managerialism, aligned with neoliberal ideologies, has replaced collegial models with top-down approaches emphasizing accountability, key performance indicators (KPIs), and strategic management (Marlia et al., 2025; Azman et al., 2023). Local priorities are no longer the performance goals, as international standards are the new performance targets, and global visibility is the main concern. As it is observed in Asia and Europe, university planning is becoming very much dominated by KPIs (Gornitzka et al., 2020; De Boer et al., 2020).

### C. Rankings and Governance

University ranking is becoming more important in institutional governance because it influences the planning,

hiring, and budget of institutions. Investments in high-impact research, faculty internationalization, and resource optimization are the attempts of institutions to enhance ranking indicators. In Asia, governments have developed the use of world-class university initiatives, which are allocated funds depending on the performance that is tied to ranking (Mohrman et al., 2021). Gulf countries in the Middle East have immense investments on international relationships to enhance ranking presence (Romani, 2020). The European universities, especially in the UK and the Netherlands, have implemented performance-based systems with global metrics (De Boer et al., 2020). These are practices that are indicative of the increasingly interdependent relationship between rankings and governance.

### D. Kurdistan Context

The higher education system in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq includes both public and private institutions, undergoing significant reforms to address issues of quality, regulation, and autonomy. Nevertheless, the policy work is largely empty of any empirical research that tries to identify the effect of global rankings on governance or strategic planning in Kurdistan universities. The regulatory frameworks are still immature and institutional regulation is usually torn between the state regulation and the market needs. The HEIs in Kurdistan have difficulty in meeting the international standards because of the lack of capacity, political unrest, and lack of research infrastructure (Jasim et al., 2024; Abdulrahman and Ahmed, 2021; Massoudi et al., 2025). This gap highlights the need for

TABLE I  
RELIABILITY OF SCALES

Scale	Cronbach's alpha	Number of items
Global university ranking	0.828	10
Higher education governance	0.706	10

Source: Prepared by a researcher

TABLE II  
SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS (N=475)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	355	74.7
	Female	120	25.3
Age	Under 30 years	5	1.1
	30–39 years	65	13.7
	40–49 years	265	55.8
	50 years and above	140	29.5
Academic rank	Assistant lecturer	70	14.7
	Lecturer	165	34.7
	Assistant professor	195	41.1
	Professor	45	9.5
Years of experience	<5 years	50	10.5
	5–10 years	60	12.6
	11–15 years	180	37.9
	More than 15 years	185	38.9
Type of university	Public	330	69.5
	Private	145	30.5
Are you involved in institutional strategy or ranking?	No	155	32.6
	Yes	320	67.4

Source: Prepared by researcher

TABLE III  
LINEAR REGRESSION ANALYSIS PREDICTING HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNANCE FROM GLOBAL UNIVERSITY RANKINGS (N=475)

Model	B	Beta	t	Sig.	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	F	Significance F
(Constant)	0.651	–	4.52	0.000	0.74	0.547	0.546	571.691	0.000
Global University ranking	0.861	0.74	23.91	0.000	–	–	–	–	–

Source: Prepared by researcher

future practical inquiry into the interplay between governance reforms and global ranking aspirations.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive and analytical research design. Data were collected using a questionnaire targeting a sample of public and private universities in the Kurdistan Region and analyzed using descriptive and analytical statistical tools to derive results:

#### A. Methods Used

Quantitative data analysis using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program to analyze questionnaires and test hypotheses.

#### B. Research Community Sample

Research sample: The sample consisted of 475 respondents out of 1,275 academic leaders from 33 public and private universities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

#### C. Measurement of Variables

Independent Variable: Global University Rankings (10 items), Dependent Variable: Higher Education Governance (10 items) 5-point Likert scale.

#### D. Analytical Approach

Descriptive statistics, correlation, regression, and hypothesis testing.

#### E. Reliability of Scales

The reliability of scales appears in Table I.

The two scales have demonstrated that they are reliable to use in our study. Cronbach's alpha was very high (0.828), which results in the Global University Ranking scale being very consistent. The Higher Education Governance scale was also found to be adequately consistent, with an alpha of 0.706. As both sets of items continuously measure the same concepts, the author is able to proceed with the next stages of the statistical analysis with no doubts.

#### F. The Hypothetical Research Model

- Hypothesis 1: Pressures from international university rankings significantly influence policies governing higher education in the Kurdistan Region.
- Hypothesis 2: There is a positive correlation between the adoption of proactive strategies by Kurdish universities and the improvement of their rankings in international rankings.

TABLE IV  
CORRELATION BETWEEN GLOBAL UNIVERSITY RANKINGS AND HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNANCE IN THE KURDISTAN REGION

Variables	Correlations	
	Global university ranking	Higher education governance
Global University ranking		
Pearson correlation	1	0.740**
Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
<i>n</i>	475	475
Higher education governance		
Pearson correlation	0.740**	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
<i>n</i>	475	475

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Source: Prepared by researcher

- Hypothesis 3: Strategic responses to ranking pressures contribute to improving the quality of education and scientific research at universities in the Kurdistan Region.
- Hypothesis 4: The nature of the strategic responses of public universities differs from that of private universities in the Kurdistan Region to global ranking pressures.

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Use either in the study, ranking pressures and strategic responses: Examining the influence of global university rankings on Higher Education Governance in the Kurdistan Region was used to investigate the sample of the study, which includes the Universities of Kurdistan Region-Iraq, in terms of academic leadership. This paper has conducted a comprehensive review of the data attributes to get valid results. The study gathered (485) effective questionnaires out of its (500) reported subjects. The cleaning process made (475) recordable records to be able to be analyzed. Several statistical characteristics within SPSS enabled the assessment of the opinions of the participants, along with the assessment of the important relationships between the key variables. This research was based on several statistical techniques that comprised of descriptive statistics that utilized the mean and standard deviation values, along with reliability testing expressed in terms of Cronbach's alpha, which were used to derive correlation analysis using the Pearson correlation coefficient and, consequently, linear regression. The measurements of each response were taken according to a five-point Likert scale that was used by participants.

#### A. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Participants

The socio-demographic characteristics of participants appear in Table II.

TABLE V  
REGRESSION ANALYSIS PREDICTING QUALITY OF EDUCATION AND RESEARCH FROM STRATEGIC RESPONSES (N=475)

Model	B	Beta	t	Sig.	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F	Significance F
(Constant)	-0.558	–	-5.784	0.000	0.91	0.827	2264.176	0.000
Proactive strategies	1.118	0.91	47.583	0.000	–	–	–	–

Source: Prepared by researcher

TABLE VI  
COMPARISON OF STRATEGIC RESPONSES BETWEEN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES (N=475)

University type	n	Mean	Standard deviation	t	df	Significance (2-tailed)	Cohen's d
Private	145	4.238	0.251	4.782	473	0.000	0.484
Public	330	4.008	0.556				

Source: Prepared by researcher

As illustrated in Table II, most of them are male (74.7%) and of the age 40–49 years (55.8%). In academic ranking, the respondents were mostly assistant professors (41.1%), then lecturers (34.7%), assistant lecturers (14.7%), and professors (9.5%). With respect to experience, 38.9% were of over 15 years in the academic field, and 37.9% had 11–15 years. The majority of the participants belonged to the public universities (69.5%), and 30.5% belonged to the private universities. Furthermore, 67.4% said that they were engaged in institutional strategy or ranking activities, as compared to 32.6% who were not.

#### B. Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Higher Education Governance from Global University Rankings

Linear regression analysis to predict higher education governance based on the global university rankings in Table III.

In Table III, it was revealed that the world university ranking is a significant predictor of higher education governance in the Kurdish universities. This model explains 54.7% of the variance ( $R^2 = 0.547$ ). The predictor is strongly positively related ( $r = 0.740$ ,  $t = 23.91$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). This implies that universities respond to the pressure of international ranking and the governance policy is hugely influenced, which gives great reinforcement to Hypothesis 1.

#### C. Correlation between Global University Rankings and Higher Education Governance in the Kurdistan Region

Table IV contains the correlation between global university rankings and higher education governance in the Kurdistan Region.

Table IV indicates that there is a strong positive relationship between higher education governance and global university ranking ( $R = 0.740$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). This substantial correlation proves the hypothesis 1 and proves that strong management measures are used in the universities where the pressure is high.

#### D. Regression Analysis Predicting Quality of Education and Research from Strategic Responses

Table V contains the regression analysis predicting the quality of education and research based on strategically responding.

Table V reveals that the strategic responses to ranking pressures are a highly predictive indicator of the improvement in the quality of education and scientific research. The model has a high standardized coefficient ( $= 0.91$ ,  $T = 47.583$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) and the model explains 82.7% variance ( $R = 0.827$ ). The findings uphold the claim that active strategies implemented by universities can make significant contributions to the enhancement of the quality of education and research and corroborate Hypothesis 3.

#### E. Comparison of Strategic Responses between Public and Private Universities

The comparison of strategic responses between public and private universities appears in Table VI.

Table VI indicates that the private ( $M = 4.238$ ,  $SD = 0.251$ ) and public universities ( $M = 4.008$ ,  $SD = 0.556$ ),  $T(473) = 4.782$ ,  $P < 0.001$ , indicate a statistically significant difference in strategic reactions between  $P < 0.001$ . This shows that the private universities are responding with powerful strategic responses to the ranking pressures as compared to the public universities and offers grounds in favor of hypothesis 4.

## V. CONCLUSION

The results of this paper revealed that global university ranking effects are adequate in influencing the higher education governance in the Kurdistan region and that the institutions are gradually responding to the ranking pressure by way of taking up their own policies and structures accordingly. It has been demonstrated that ranking considerations and governance reforms are strongly related and that the ranking becomes critical in the design of the decision-making processes. The findings also show that active strategic responses significantly enhance the quality of education and research, reinforcing the importance of institutional adjustment. Finally, the analysis of the differences between the public and the private universities shows that there are incredible differences; the private universities have responded with powerful strategic responses to the pressure when compared to the public. Generally, the research validates all hypotheses put forward and highlights the changing nature of the global university rankings in enhancing the driver and the quality of higher education.

### A. Recommendations

Considering the results, there are a number of strategic recommendations that can be offered to help policy makers and institutional leaders to align themselves with the global ranking schemes and, at the same time, ensure the protection of academic integrity and national priorities:

1. Universities in the Kurdistan Region should develop clear, data-driven strategies to address ranking criteria.
2. Increased funding for faculty-led research, particularly in high-impact and globally relevant areas, is essential.
3. Partnerships with leading international institutions should be prioritized.
4. The digital libraries, laboratories, and learning management systems should be upgraded. Quality infrastructure will assist in not only the excellence of research, but also the effectiveness of teaching: Two fundamental dimensions of global ranking methodologies.
5. Developing robust networks of alumni and employer alliances can improve the results of graduates, a new measure in a number of ranking schemes. Universities will be better positioned to be more competitive through structured career services and feedback loops with industry.
6. The KPIs associated with rankings should be incorporated in the institutions by means of governance. Consistent benchmarking and internal audits will provide the continuity and various adherence to international expectations.

### B. Limitations and Future Research

Although this paper provides critical perspectives on the overlap between global university ranking and governance of the Kurdistan Region, there are a number of limitations that have to be noted. To start with, the research depends on the answers of academic leadership only, which may in turn disregard the ideas of other key stakeholder groups, such as faculty, students, and administrative staff. Besides, the use of self-reported data might also be biased, and participants might represent the responses by institutions more positively.

Second, the study is limited by the cross-sectional nature of the study, which fails to detect long-term changes in governance or strategic behavior. This study was unable to address temporal dynamics (e.g., how ranking pressures

change over time or across policy cycles). In future studies, they should take longitudinal or mixed-methods where comparative studies are conducted in other regions or countries to put findings in context and come up with generalized conclusions.

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