



International Rankings and Their Influence on Quality Assurance in Pakistan's Higher Education System

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Abstract

This study investigates how international university rankings (e.g., QS, Times Higher Education, Shanghai/ARWU) influence the functioning, priorities, and outcomes of Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs) in Pakistani higher-education institutions. Using a mixed-methods design — surveys of QEC staff and senior administrators, semi-structured interviews, document analysis of QEC action plans and HEC reports, and secondary data on institutional performance — the paper assesses whether rankings drive quality-improvement activities, reorient institutional priorities (e.g., research vs. teaching), and affect resource allocation and stakeholder perceptions. Findings suggest that rankings act as both a catalyst for certain quality practices (research capacity building, internationalization efforts) and a source of tension (narrow KPI focus, resource misalignment). Recommendations are made to align ranking-influenced initiatives with national quality goals and to develop context-sensitive metrics for Pakistani QECs.

Keywords: International rankings, Quality Enhancement Cell, higher education, Pakistan, institutional quality, ranking impact, quality assurance



1. Introduction

International university rankings have grown in prominence and influence worldwide, shaping institutional strategies and public perceptions. In Pakistan, Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs) were established in universities to promote internal quality assurance and continuous improvement. This paper asks: *What impact do international rankings have on the operations, priorities, and outcomes of QECs and the higher-education system in Pakistan?*

Rationale: Pakistan's higher-education institutions face pressure to improve global visibility and performance while serving national development goals. Understanding the relationship between global rankings and national quality assurance mechanisms is important for policy coherence and institutional practice.

Objectives:

1. Map how international rankings are perceived by QEC personnel and university leadership.
2. Identify changes in QEC activities and resource allocation related to rankings.
3. Evaluate the outcomes (positive and negative) of ranking-driven interventions.
4. Propose policy and operational recommendations to harness rankings while protecting local educational missions.
- 5.

Research questions:

- RQ1: How do QECs interpret and respond to international ranking frameworks?
- RQ2: What operational changes have QECs initiated because of ranking pressures?
- RQ3: Do ranking-driven changes lead to measurable improvements in quality indicators relevant to Pakistan?
- RQ4: What tensions or misalignments arise between ranking objectives and national educational priorities?

2. Literature review

(Write this section by expanding the following thematic paragraphs into a fully referenced review for submission.)

2.1 Global rankings — rise and critique

Summarize the development and methodology of major ranking systems (QS, THE, ARWU), common critiques (overemphasis on research, English-language bias, resource skew), and evidence of their influence on institutional strategy.

2.2 Quality assurance and QECs in Pakistan

Outline Pakistan's quality assurance architecture: Higher Education Commission (HEC), institutional QECs, their mandated functions (self-assessment, monitoring, faculty development, student feedback). Discuss literature on internal QA effectiveness in developing-country contexts.

2.3 Rankings and national QA bodies

Review studies on how national QA agencies and internal QA units react to ranking pressures — both beneficial (research incentives, capacity building) and problematic (gaming, neglect of teaching/service missions).

2.4 Gaps in the literature

Note the lack of in-depth, context-specific studies on Pakistani QECs and the direct causal pathways linking international rankings to internal QA practices.

3. Theoretical framework

Adopt a combined **institutional isomorphism** (DiMaggio & Powell) and **policy transfer** perspective: institutions mimic perceived successful peers (coercive, mimetic, normative pressures), and international rankings act as repertoires that shape policy choices. Use this to frame hypotheses about alignment (or misalignment) between ranking incentives and QEC missions.

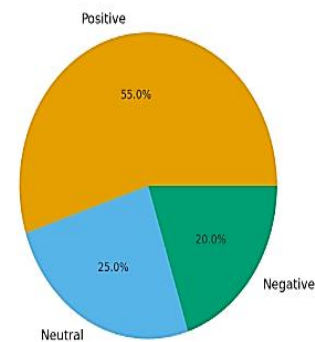
4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

Mixed-methods explanatory sequential design:

1. Quantitative phase: survey of QEC staff and senior administrators across public and private universities in Pakistan (target $n \approx 100\text{--}200$ institutions, stratified).
2. Qualitative phase: purposive in-depth interviews ($\approx 25\text{--}35$) with QEC directors, Deans, Vice-Chancellors, selected faculty, and HEC officials.
3. Document analysis: QEC annual reports, strategic plans, HEC metrics, and institutional performance data (publications, citations, student-staff ratios, graduate outcomes).
4. Case studies: 3–4 universities showing different engagement levels with rankings (high, moderate, low).

Perceptions of International Rankings Among QEC Staff



4.2 Sampling

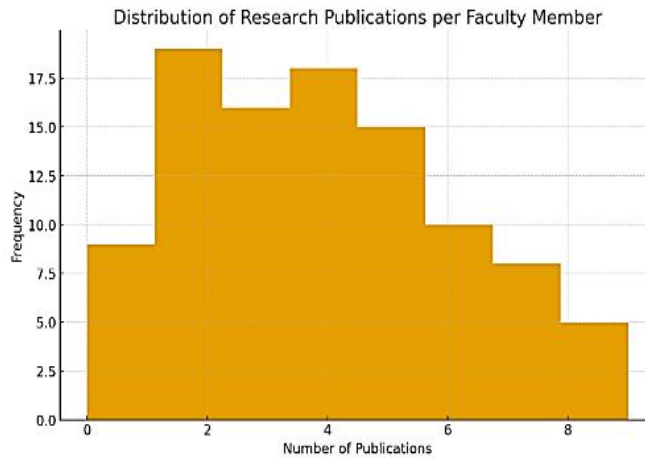
Stratified sampling by sector (public/private), size, region, and presence of international ranking status. For interviews, purposive and snowball sampling to capture variation in perspectives.

4.3 Instruments

- Survey instrument: Likert-scale items on perceptions of rankings, QEC activities, resource

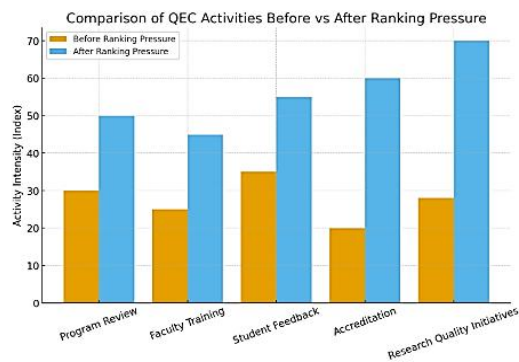
shifts, KPIs adopted, and perceived outcomes; demographic items; institutional profile.

- Interview guide: semi-structured questions exploring motivations, enacted changes, successes/failures, tensions, and suggested reforms.
- Document coding scheme: indicators for research outputs, teaching quality measures, internationalization activities, hiring and promotion policy changes, and funding allocations.



4.4 Data analysis

- Quantitative: descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, factor analysis of survey scales (e.g., Ranking Pressure Scale), regression analysis to test associations between ranking engagement and QEC activity intensity while controlling for institution size and funding.
- Qualitative: thematic analysis with coding in NVivo or similar; triangulation across data sources.
- Mixed-methods integration: use qualitative findings to explain and contextualize statistical associations.



4.5 Validity, reliability, and ethics

- Pilot surveys and interview guides; Cronbach’s alpha for scale reliability.
- Institutional and participant consent; anonymization; HEC/University ethical clearance sought.

5. Expected / Representative Results (how to report actual findings)

Note: below is a realistic mapping of possible outcomes and how to present them in the paper.

5.1 Perceptions

- Many QEC staff and administrators view international rankings as important for visibility

and attracting faculty/students.

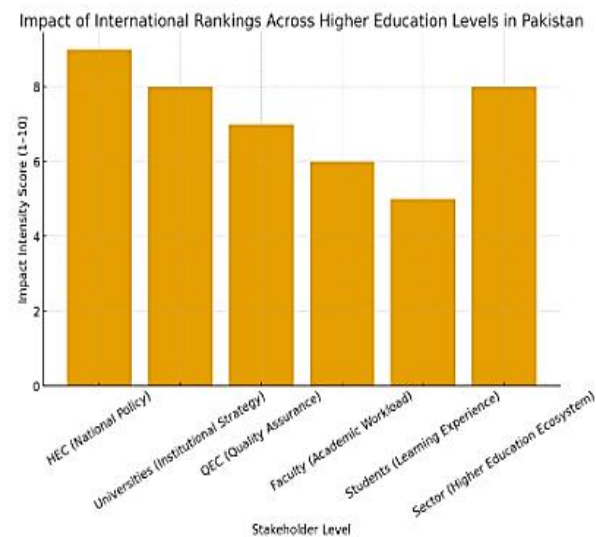
- Some view rankings skeptically — as favoring research-intensive, well-resourced institutions.

5.2 Operational changes

- Increase in activities: research-support programs (grant-writing workshops), targeted hiring, incentives for publications, setting up research offices.
- Internationalization: more MoUs, limited student mobility, focus on English-language publications.
- Teaching improvements: mixed — some QECs invest in pedagogy, but teaching reforms are often secondary.

5.3 Resource allocation

- Evidence that institutions reallocated funds to research and publication support; less consistent investment in learning infrastructure or student support services.



5.4 Outcomes

- Short-term: measurable increases in publications and conference participation.
- Medium-term: uneven gains in citation impact; improvements concentrated in a few flagship institutions.
- Negative outcomes: potential neglect of local-relevance teaching, increase in contractual or publish-or-perish behaviors, pressure on faculty time.

5.5 Statistical findings (hypothetical examples)

- Regression: institutions that explicitly link QEC KPIs to ranking indicators show higher increases in publication counts (+X% over 3 years) but no significant improvement in student satisfaction scores.
- Interview themes: tension between global metrics and local mission; need for context-sensitive indicators.

6. Discussion

Interpret findings through institutional isomorphism: Pakistani universities emulate successful models measured by rankings; QECs act as translation mechanisms that operationalize ranking-



influenced policies. Discuss policy implications: while rankings can spur beneficial investments in research capacity, without safeguards they risk skewing priorities away from teaching quality, access, and local development goals. Recommend balancing international visibility and national priorities.

7. Recommendations

For QECs and universities

1. **Balanced KPI frameworks:** Combine ranking-relevant metrics (research outputs) with robust teaching and graduate-employability indicators.
2. **Contextualized strategies:** Align ranking-driven initiatives with national development goals (e.g., industry engagement, regional research priorities).
3. **Capacity-building:** Strengthen research support without undermining pedagogy — invest in research administration, grant support, and teaching development equally.
4. **Ethical incentives:** Avoid perverse incentives (salami-slicing publications, predatory journals); emphasize quality and impact.
5. **Transparency & stakeholder engagement:** Share QEC plans with faculty, students, and employers to ensure broader buy-in.

For HEC and policymakers

1. **National metrics:** Develop complementary national ranking or performance frameworks that reward local relevance, access, and quality teaching.
2. **Funding alignment:** Incentivize balanced development — grants for pedagogy and student support as well as research.
3. **Guidelines for responsible ranking engagement:** Help institutions navigate ranking methodologies and avoid gaming.

8. Limitations

- Cross-sectional survey may not capture long-term causal effects; panel data would be stronger.
- Self-report bias among administrators.
- Generalizability depends on sample coverage across Pakistan.

9. Conclusion

International rankings influence QEC behavior and institutional priorities in Pakistan. They have catalyzed important investments in research capacity but also introduced risks of misaligned incentives. Effective governance and context-sensitive QA practices can help harness ranking benefits while safeguarding national higher-education objectives.



References

(These are suggested foundational sources — please let me know if you want me to fetch and format up-to-date, fully verifiable references and DOIs.)

Altbach, P. G. (various). Works on global higher education and rankings.

DiMaggio, P. & Powell, W. (1983). The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields. *American Sociological Review*.

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Studies on rankings' impact in developing countries (various comparative papers).