RANKINGS AND QUALITY ASSURANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN VIETNAM

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Article info	Abstract
	University rankings have garnered significant attention within Vietnam's higher education sector, exerting considerable influence on institutional operations, state governance, and societal direction. However, concerns persist regarding the appropriateness of ranking criteria and the correlation between rankings and the actual quality of education. This study, through an examination of quality assurance in higher education and an analysis of prevalent ranking criteria, elucidates the distinctions among various ranking systems and critically evaluates the challenges and impacts they pose for stakeholders. The findings provide valuable insights into the benefits and implications of university rankings, offering guidance for stakeholders to approach and utilize ranking data more effectively.

XẾP HẠNG VÀ BẢO ĐẢM CHẤT LƯỢNG GIÁO DỤC ĐẠI HỌC
Ở VIỆT NAM HIỆN NAY

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https://doi.org/10.51453/2354-1431/2024/1155

Thông tin bài báo	**Tóm tắt**
	Xếp hạng đại học đang thu hút sự quan tâm đáng kể trong lĩnh vực giáo dục đại học tại Việt Nam, với ảnh hưởng sâu rộng đến hoạt động của các cơ sở giáo dục, quản lý nhà nước và định hướng xã hội. Tuy nhiên, nhiều lo ngại vẫn tồn tại về tính phù hợp của các tiêu chí xếp hạng và mối quan hệ giữa xếp hạng và chất lượng đào tạo thực tế. Thông qua nghiên cứu về bảo đảm chất lượng giáo dục và phân tích các tiêu chí xếp hạng phổ biến, nghiên cứu này làm rõ sự khác biệt giữa các bảng xếp hạng, đồng thời phân tích các thách thức và tác động mà chúng gây ra đối với các bên liên quan. Kết quả nghiên cứu cung cấp những hiểu biết sâu sắc về lợi ích cũng như ảnh hưởng của xếp hạng đối với giáo dục đại học, góp phần định hướng cho các bên liên quan trong việc tiếp cận và sử dụng thông tin từ các bảng xếp hạng một cách hiệu quả hơn.

1. Introduction

In 2023, a group of authors introduced, for the first time, a ranking system for higher education institutions in Vietnam (VNUR). This ranking system attracted considerable public attention, sparking widespread discussions regarding the VNUR rankings specifically, as well as the broader topic of university rankings. Concerns have been raised about the reliability of such rankings and their correlation with the assurance of quality in higher education.

Globally, university rankings have been established since the early 21st century and are now widely prevalent. Issues related to university rankings and higher education quality have been extensively researched and debated by scholars [13, 4, 5, 6]. A key focus of these discussions is whether rankings can meaningfully contribute to the assurance of quality in higher education [13, 6]. These debates remain ongoing and unresolved.

In the context of increasing globalization and integration within higher education, Vietnam's higher education system faces fierce competition both domestically and internationally. Quality assurance mechanisms, including ranking systems, play a crucial role in enhancing

transparency within the "market" of higher education. University rankings exert a substantial influence on stakeholders, including institutions, students, and policymakers. As interest in these rankings grows, so too do concerns regarding the relationship between rankings and the educational quality of institutions.

In order to address these concerns, we aim to clarify several key points: (1) What is quality assurance in higher education, and how is it implemented? (2) What are the criteria used in university rankings, and how do different rankings compare? (3) What challenges do university rankings present, and what are their potential impacts? Based on these analyses, we provide recommendations for higher education administrators, institutions, and stakeholders on how to interpret and utilize university rankings effectively.

Prior to presenting the research findings and conclusions, we first outline the historical context of research on this topic, both globally and in Vietnam, as well as the methodology and approach employed in this study. In the results section, we begin by examining higher education quality assurance in general, with particular focus on the current quality assurance policies in Vietnam. Subsequently, we provide an analysis of the criteria used in prominent university ranking systems globally and within Vietnam, addressing ongoing debates surrounding these criteria. We then elucidate the challenges associated with university rankings, followed by an assessment of the impact these rankings have on various stakeholders. In the concluding section, we offer key recommendations for stakeholders in higher education, emphasizing critical considerations when evaluating university rankings and the quality of educational institutions.

2. Literature Review

In discussions of higher education and academia, quality and excellence are often the foremost associations. Accordingly, many scholars concur that "the evaluation and assurance of academic quality are fundamental to higher education" [2]. Since the early 1980s, universities worldwide have faced increasing external pressure to ensure quality and accountability. Various external quality assurance mechanisms have emerged, including quality evaluations, audits, and accreditation processes. University rankings, introduced in 2003, have become an increasingly widespread tool. The relationship between university rankings and the assurance of higher education quality has garnered significant scholarly interest [2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7]. Rankings provide a wide range of data on individual institutions, which can be utilized for internal analysis through benchmarking or other comparative frameworks [7]. In this context, university rankings can be viewed as a quality assurance tool for higher education [4]. However, debates persist regarding the criteria and disparities between different university rankings [5]. Global and national rankings have, in fact, been incorporated into the quality assurance frameworks of various countries and regions.

Vietnam's higher education system is currently undergoing significant integration and faces intense competition both domestically and internationally. The development and quality assurance of higher education are key policy areas being addressed by the government [16, 13]. Vietnamese higher education institutions are gradually building and enhancing their internal quality assurance systems. Additionally, international university rankings have gained considerable attention, with some institutions integrating ranking improvements into their strategic development plans.

In 2023, a group of authors introduced the first national ranking system for higher education institutions in Vietnam the VNUR Ranking [17].

This ranking has attracted widespread societal interest. Prior to this, in 2020, a research team from Vietnam National University, Hanoi, with support from the Ministry of Education and Training, developed the UPM framework, a quality assessment system for higher education institutions [15]. Thus, Vietnam has begun establishing national ranking systems, although concerns remain about the reliability of these rankings.

Despite the growing interest in rankings, Vietnamese higher education institutions have largely lacked detailed analyses of the criteria used in ranking systems. This has resulted in vague and often unrealistic expectations regarding their positions in these rankings. Furthermore, no studies in Vietnam have yet assessed the mutual influence between participation in international rankings and the enhancement of institutional quality. These gaps highlight the need for research on the relationship between popular university rankings and quality assurance in higher education.

3. Methods

To elucidate the relationship between university rankings and quality assurance in Vietnam's higher education system, we first employ a theoretical analysis to clarify the concept of quality assurance, with particular emphasis on external quality assurance mechanisms. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the theoretical framework and evaluation standards. Second, we conduct a comparative analysis of ranking criteria between prominent international and domestic university rankings, aiming to identify key differences in evaluation standards. This method allows for an assessment of the relevance and impact of these criteria on higher education in Vietnam. Third, we apply a cross-referenced analysis, comparing research findings with the current state of higher education in Vietnam, to draw conclusions on the relationship

between rankings and educational quality. This approach helps identify the strengths, weaknesses, and implications of ranking systems for domestic higher education institutions.

4. Results

4.1. Quality assurance in higher education

Quality assurance has emerged as one of the most critical topics in both academic and policy discussions on higher education. While issues related to higher education quality assurance in Vietnam have only gained significant attention in recent years due to policy reforms, these concerns have been a central focus in developed educational systems for much longer. It is essential to recognize the intrinsic relationship between higher education, science, and the pursuit of quality and excellence. As noted, "Evaluation, accreditation, and quality assurance are core to the essence of higher education" [2]. The quest for knowledge and scientific discovery inherently involves striving for excellence, with various forms of evaluation and peer review having a longstanding tradition in both science and higher education.

Higher education quality assurance refers to a comprehensive and ongoing process of evaluation (encompassing assessment, monitoring, assurance, maintenance, and enhancement) of the quality of higher education systems, institutions, and programs [14]. Fundamentally, it emphasizes processes aimed at accountability and continuous quality improvement. The goal is to "provide internal and external stakeholders with assurance that institutions have effective mechanisms in place to produce high-quality outcomes" [8]. Additionally, quality assurance operates as a continuous and cohesive system.

Quality assurance comprises both internal and external mechanisms. Internal quality assurance involves institutional policies and processes designed to ensure that an institution or academic program meets its stated goals and

the broader standards of higher education or specific professional disciplines. External quality assurance, on the other hand, is conducted by external bodies that assess whether an institution or program meets agreed-upon standards of quality.

External quality assurance is typically implemented through three key mechanisms: university rankings, quality benchmarking, and accreditation. University rankings assess institutions' strengths and weaknesses relative to others and to general standards. We will further explore the role of rankings in subsequent sections. Quality benchmarking involves comparing the performance of an institution or program against others within the same field, based on predefined criteria and standards. Accreditation is a formal process wherein an external agency evaluates an institution or program to determine if it meets established minimum standards. Accreditation is widely regarded as a fundamental model of quality assurance in contemporary higher education systems [8].

In the context of policy initiatives that promote greater autonomy for higher education institutions, institutional accountability has gained increasing attention in Vietnam. Concurrently, the development of a comprehensive quality assurance framework for higher education is a national priority. On January 14th, 2022, the Prime Minister approved the "Program for the Development of a Quality Assurance and Accreditation System for Higher Education and Teacher Training Colleges, 2022-2030." Under this plan, by 2030, all higher education institutions are required to establish internal quality assurance systems to effectively implement strategic objectives and cultivate a quality-focused culture. Furthermore, 100% of higher education institutions and 80% of academic programs are expected to meet established quality standards through accreditation cycles aligned with the program's objectives.

4.2. Global and National University Rankings in Vietnam

In the context of robust educational globalization, global university rankings have emerged at the dawn of this millennium and rapidly transformed into a prominent phenomenon, capturing the interest of various stakeholders both within and outside the realm of higher education. The publication of the Shanghai Ranking (ARWU) by the Center for World-Class Universities at Shanghai Jiao Tong University in 2003 marked a significant milestone. This development has been likened by Kauppi to "a global explosion that immediately drew the attention of anyone engaged in higher education and research" [5]. Currently, ARWU ranks over 2,500 universities annually, releasing a list of the "Top 1000 Universities" based on six specific criteria: the number of alumni awarded Nobel Prizes or Fields Medals (10%); the number of staff awarded Nobel Prizes or Fields Medals (20%); the number of highly cited researchers (20%); the number of articles published in Nature and Science (20%); the number of articles published in journals indexed by SCIE or SSCI (20%); and per capita performance (10%). This clearly indicates that ARWU's methodology is biased towards evaluating research activities at educational institutions. Furthermore, the reliance on English-language databases contributes to a bias against other languages and cultures, thus favoring institutions in the United States and the United Kingdom. These aspects are frequently cited as points of criticism directed at ARWU [5].

In 2004, Times Higher Education Extra (now known as Times Higher Education) published its rankings (THE) in collaboration with Quacquarelli Symonds (QS). By 2010, THE began working with Thomson Reuters, while QS established its own ranking system. Most recently, THE announced its rankings for 1,799 universities across 104 countries and territories. The methodology employed by THE relies on

13 performance indicators, categorized into five groups [12]: teaching (30%), research (30%), citations (30%), international outlook (7.5%), and industry income (2.5%). The teaching category is assessed using five indicators: reputation survey (15%), staff-to-student ratio (4.5%), PhD-to-undergraduate ratio (2.25%), PhD-to-faculty ratio (6%), and institutional income (2.25%). The research category is divided into three indicators: reputation survey (18%), research income (6%), and research productivity (6%). The international outlook category is evaluated based on three indicators: international student ratio (2.5%), international staff ratio (2.5%), and international collaboration (2.5%). The methodology of THE has prompted scrutiny, particularly regarding the annual Academic Reputation Survey conducted with over 20,000 scholars, whose individual assessments constitute the foundation for the teaching (15%) and research (18%) categories, which together account for one-third (33%) of the overall ranking score. Moreover, the relevance of citations is debatable, as researchers publishing in languages other than English face inherent disadvantages [5].

The QS ranking methodology, up until 2023, has been based on six indicators [9]: academic reputation (40%), employer reputation (10%), faculty-to-student ratio (20%), average faculty citations (20%), international faculty ratio (5%), and international student ratio (5%). The 20th edition (2024) of the QS rankings encompassed 1,500 universities across 104 countries and territories. This edition marks a significant evolution, being the first to incorporate three new indicators focused on sustainability, employment opportunities, and international research networks, each weighted at 5% [10]. Furthermore, in this iteration, QS reduced the weight of the academic reputation indicator by 10%, lowered the weight for the faculty-to-student ratio by 10%, and increased the weight of the employer reputation indicator by 5%. As a result, the QS 2024 ranking utilizes

nine indicators [11]: academic reputation (30%), employer reputation (15%), faculty-to-student ratio (10%), average faculty citations (20%), international faculty ratio (5%), international student ratio (5%), sustainability (5%), employment opportunities (5%), and international research networks (5%). Despite being regarded as the most influential international ranking, QS has faced criticism regarding the subjectivity inherent in the data collected from scholars and employers, who may be "more influenced by the existing reputation of a university (the 'halo effect') than by actual knowledge of the quality of its programs" [3].

The preceding discussion highlights the three oldest international university rankings, which are presently regarded as the most prevalent and influential. Beyond these three, numerous other international rankings exist, including U-Multirank, Webometrics ... A preliminary analysis of the aforementioned rankings reveals significant methodological variations, leading to differences in the indicators and weightings employed in measuring institutional quality.

In the context of increasing globalization and integration of education, higher education institutions in Vietnam have begun to focus on university rankings in recent years. The eighth plenum of the 13th Party Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam adopted a resolution aimed at "continuing to build and enhance the role of intellectuals in meeting the requirements for rapid and sustainable national development in the new phase." This resolution sets a target for 2030, which includes "developing several research institutions and higher education establishments that achieve advanced levels, ranking among the top in Asia; specifically, Hanoi National University and Ho Chi Minh City National University should be positioned within the top 500 universities globally" [13]. As a result, many universities in Vietnam have incorporated their aspirations for

ranking in international assessments into their medium-term and long-term strategic development plans. However, attaining a recognized ranking in these international frameworks poses significant challenges for the majority of universities in Vietnam.

In 2023, the inaugural "Vietnam University Ranking" (VNUR) was introduced, formulated by a collective of authors within the framework of the non-profit organization Vietnam Education Index (VEINDEX). VNUR encompasses all Vietnamese universities offering bachelor's degree programs or their equivalents [17], employing a methodology based on 17 criteria categorized into six standards: recognized quality (30%), teaching effectiveness (25%), scholarly publications (20%), scientific research and innovation efforts (10%), student quality (10%), and infrastructural facilities (5%). In 2024, VNUR revised several of its ranking criteria, although the fundamental standards and their respective weightings remained unchanged [18]. It is noteworthy that the data utilized for VNUR was not supplied by the higher education institutions and did not involve any survey methodologies [17].

Earlier, in 2020, a research team from Hanoi National University introduced a quality assessment system for universities known as UPM. This initiative received funding from the Ministry of Education and Training. UPM employs a scoring system out of 1000, based on 52 indicators spanning eight domains: strategic ambition (60 points), education quality (350 points), scientific research output (200 points), innovation (100 points), university ecosystem (80 points), digital transformation (80 points), internationalization (50 points), and community service (80 points). Based on the assessment results, UPM assigns rankings to higher education institutions ranging from 1 to 5 stars and 5 stars ELITE [15]. It is important to clarify that UPM does not conduct automatic assessments and rankings for all higher education

institutions but only evaluates those institutions that voluntarily register for participation. As of now, over 50 higher education institutions from Brunei, Myanmar, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, and Taiwan are engaged in this ranking system [15].

4.3. Challenges of University Rankings

Despite the increasing prevalence of university rankings in higher education globally, these rankings face significant scrutiny and skepticism. One primary concern raised by researchers is whether university rankings constitute a valid method for assessing quality. In contrast to most quality assessment frameworks, which rely on specific benchmarks to evaluate an institution's performance and provide actionable insights for enhancement, rankings primarily establish correlations among institutions based on selected indicators. As noted, "an analysis of current rankings reveals that the majority lack a clear and theoretically grounded understanding of quality" [4]. The question arises: if an institution occupies a particular position in the rankings this year but shifts to a different position the following year, does this indicate a decline or improvement in quality? Even marginal numerical differences can lead to significant fluctuations in an institution's ranking. Additionally, most ranking methodologies do not account for specific fields, disciplines, or programs, making it challenging to use ranking positions as a definitive measure of quality in higher education. Whether university rankings serve as a legitimate form of quality evaluation remains a contentious debate, with no clear resolution in sight.

Another area of concern is the reliability of the rankings themselves. Different ranking systems employ diverse methodologies, utilize various indicators, and assign different weightings to these indicators. As a result, "only a limited number of output indicators are deemed valuable, reliable, and genuinely comparable," and they are often "constrained in their ability to measure

research activities within the natural sciences" [4]. This raises questions about the existence of a standardized level of assessment in university rankings, as the criteria used tend to reflect substantial subjectivity. Consequently, the ranking position of an institution is relative, heavily influenced by the indicators that receive greater weight, which may not accurately reflect the quality concerns of stakeholders, particularly students. Furthermore, rankings can vary significantly across different systems, further complicating the assessment process. The reliability of these rankings is also contingent upon the data they collect. The accuracy and objectivity of this data are crucial factors; while many rankings conduct extensive surveys of scholars' opinions, the results of such surveys often remain contentious and open to debate.

4.4. Impact of University Rankings

Despite the ongoing debate regarding their validity, university rankings have become increasingly prevalent in the realm of higher education. These rankings serve to fulfill the growing demand for transparency within an education system that is becoming ever more competitive. The primary objective of university rankings is to enhance transparency in higher education from an external viewpoint and facilitate comparative assessments among institutions [4]. Consequently, university rankings attract the attention of various stakeholders, including students, their families, institutional leaders, and governmental bodies.

For prospective students and their families, university rankings provide a reference point for selecting academic programs and institutions, and they may even influence decisions regarding program changes. Given the current landscape of expanding higher education and the proliferation of diverse institutions offering numerous courses, programs, and degrees, choosing an educational institution can be a source of significant stress.

In this context, rankings can serve as a valuable reference tool. However, as previously noted, it is imperative for students to conduct thorough investigations into these rankings to make informed choices that align with their individual needs and aspirations.

University rankings also exert considerable influence on the operational dynamics of educational institutions. Institutional leaders often perceive rankings as essential tools for management and strategic decision-making. The competition among universities has intensified significantly at both national and international levels. Institutions are vying for students, faculty, funding, and prestige. As a result, many universities have incorporated ranking objectives into their strategic development frameworks. While the data provided by rankings may not always yield causal insights, they can serve as an initial basis for more comprehensive analyses of an institution's strengths and weaknesses. This, in turn, enables institutional leaders to make informed strategic decisions, develop actionable plans, and allocate resources effectively to enhance educational quality. Nonetheless, some stakeholders express concerns that an overemphasis on rankings may lead institutions to focus narrowly on improving specific metrics rather than genuinely enhancing the overall quality of education.

The trend towards increased institutional autonomy has generated heightened expectations for accountability to both governmental authorities and society at large. In this context, university rankings play a crucial role in promoting transparency regarding institutional activities and serve as tools for governmental oversight of higher education at a macro level.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

Despite ongoing debates regarding the use of rankings as a tool for assessing the quality of higher education institutions, such rankings are

gaining increasing popularity and exert significant influence both nationally and internationally. In Vietnam, quality assurance and rankings in higher education have attracted substantial attention in recent years. The strategic decision to encourage key educational institutions to participate in international rankings is a sound approach that aims to elevate the global standing and enhance the international competitiveness of Vietnam's higher education system. While most Vietnamese higher education institutions may face challenges in joining prestigious global ranking systems, establishing a national ranking framework will contribute to increased transparency within the higher education sector.

However, the development of such rankings must be undertaken with rigorous methodologies to ensure reliability. To be effective in supporting quality assurance efforts, ranking systems should adhere to certain essential principles, including: (1) maintaining a balanced set of indicators and presenting results in a manner that provides valuable insights to external stakeholders while addressing the internal needs of institutions seeking to understand and improve their performance; (2) ensuring a comprehensive data scope that enables the analysis of diverse dimensions of institutional operations; and (3) incorporating data relevant to specific disciplines, sectors, or academic programs.

For higher education institutions to engage in ranking systems, it is crucial that they carefully study the criteria of each ranking to select the most suitable framework in alignment with their development strategies. It is important to recognize that rankings serve primarily as a diagnostic tool, highlighting institutional strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, institutions must prioritize genuine quality improvement, particularly in educational outcomes, rather than focusing solely on improving ranking-related metrics. Building a robust quality assurance system remains a

more fundamental concern for higher education institutions.

Although rankings can be regarded as a mechanism for quality assurance in higher education, it is essential to critically examine the evaluation criteria and methodologies employed by these ranking systems. This will provide a more objective and tailored perspective, allowing institutions to better align with their specific goals and interests.

Acknowledgements

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