

**REGIONAL RANKINGS: BRIDGING LOCAL AND GLOBAL EDUCATIONAL
PRIORITIES**

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores 'Regional Rankings: Bridging Local and Global Educational Priorities', with a particular focus on how regional evaluation of universities can serve as a strategic link between national educational goals and global academic standards. Regional ranking is defined as the systematic assessment of universities within a specific geographic area based on multiple performance indicators. The paper examines the advantages of regional rankings and common assessment criteria that are used for the exercises. Finally, the study discusses how regional rankings can bridge the gap between local educational priorities from the perspectives of access, equity, and national developmental goals and the broader demands of globalisation, including research excellence, academic mobility, and global competitiveness. The paper concluded that by providing a balanced framework for evaluation, regional rankings have the dual potentials to stimulate meaningful improvements in university systems across diverse contexts and in their host communities.

KEYWORDS: Regional rankings, Access, Equity, National developmental goals, Performance indicators, Research excellence, Global competitiveness

INTRODUCTION

It is becoming increasingly important for every university to work out the academic and social dimensions of their institutional activities and performances in ways that will meet global standards while also, being able to satisfy local expectations and needs. The idea here is that for a university to remain competitively relevant, it must adhere to global standards of operation and for the necessity of fulfilling contextual relevance, should align teaching, learning and researching to the socio-economic needs of their immediate environment. In this way, it is expected that the quality of service and delivery strategies of a university will necessarily meet up with global expectations regardless of location or context. One of the exercises that is assumed to help a university identify its standing in the list of best of institutions and to make comparative assessment of quality and services that they offer is ranking. Ranking, from this perspective is a university's standing or position within a comparatively similar group. In practice, ranking is rooted in the principle of comparison, where the likes in identified criteria are assessed. Accordingly, a range of factors such as academic reputation, research outputs, faculty-to-student ratio are comparatively assessed. This is usually followed by the allocation of scores and based on this, the participating institutions are placed from the highest to lowest. The entire process is tailored to provide a worldwide comparative assessment of universities.

With the assumed importance of this exercise, it has become normal to have publications from different places in every academic year on university rankings. In spite of the many forms of university rankings and the exhibition of greater diversification of focus over the years, Loukola

(2018) is of the opinion that this exercise has not yet attained the status of perfection. Specifically, Loukola highlighted among others that first, (global) ranking assessment indicators tend to focus on elite universities (which implies the introduction of limitations in range of eligible or participating institutions). Secondly and most importantly, the exercise inadequately takes into consideration the institution's socio-economic context.

The **notion** that modern universities tend to align with different models of operations which also dictates how they go about their activities and relationships with the external communities is illuminating. Thus, universities that are oriented towards the global research-intensive model generally adopt a universalistic approach in their practices, devote less attention to regional issues and more interest in research and teaching (Deephouse & Suchman, as cited in Pinheiro, 2013). On the contrary, those that are oriented towards the locally embedded regional model are more responsive to contextual demands and expectations of their local constituencies. The third category of universities are those oriented towards the entrepreneurial model, they tend to be globally engaged, feature self-sustaining capabilities while remaining highly responsive to local needs and partnership activities (Clark; Perry, as cited in Pinheiro, 2013). In doing these, universities that are oriented towards the entrepreneurial model manifest a combination of universalistic tendencies and excellence as well as local relevance. The indicators here point to the fact that the strategies and collection of activities for individual universities may be difficult to generalise or to compare accurately based on a set of centralised benchmarks.

With the tendency to highlight equity issues around performance during ranking comes the idea that it should ideally be viewed in context (Alfirević et al., 2024). Moreover, the domestic landscape of educational institutions as set especially by the local economy (low, middle or high category) have been implicated in their ability to meet up with expected performance standards of a structured global ranking system (Calderon, 2020). Calderon explained further that institutions with comparatively little resources cannot afford full-on participation in global ranking. In sum, this factor accounts for the automatic elimination of some higher educational institutions from ranking exercises. From a related perspective, Sinz (2018) is of the opinion that public higher institutions are subjected to environmental (contextual) influences because they are funded largely from grants and subventions at the state and federal levels. As such, Sinz maintained that stewardship conveys the responsibility of institutions being responsive to individuals that they were established to serve and the conscious display of accountability to their constituencies, government and other locally domiciled stakeholders.

While global university ranking systems focus on the overall assessment of universities in terms of performance and quality, regional rankings dwell the more on distinctive perspectives of contextually relevant criteria, especially in aspect of impacts that they make in the immediate environment. Regional rankings assess universities within a specific geographic area (Uniranks, 2025), therefore, it can be taken that it offers the benefit of supporting emerging educational institutions. This model of ranking is designed to provide in-depth assessment of university performances within a demarcated educational space. To this extent, regional ranking criteria are typically inclined to matters related to human capital developments in the local community (students' enrollment, skill enhancement and possibility of supply into the region's labour force). They are also

oriented to become engaged and to make contributions to the host region's economic developments and industrial growths. From the foregoing, it can be argued that regional ranking draws strength from the tool box of diversity of context. Furthermore, it brings to the table, a set of fine-tuned performance assessment criteria that are in line with institutional contributions to the host environment's social, economic and political developments. The comparative parameters of regional rankings are therefore, adapted to suit where the universities are operating from and as well, the universal operating standards of higher educational institutions. It is important to mention that regional educational needs and interests are usually designed to align and to contribute to global objectives of education; therefore, they have bearings on the overall success of educational initiatives worldwide.

Although universities are doing a lot for their host communities, to Coates and Calderon (2024), these contributions are often quiet and opaque. There seem to remain a consistent need for information that will help universities to evaluate how well they are utilising their globally oriented knowledge generating activities for regional engagements and impacts. Benneworth and Fitjar (2018) added that universities can contribute to regional developments by enhancing skills in individuals and supplying graduates for employment, collaborating with local industry, contributing to host community's policy making, and supporting their innovation systems. However, Benneworth and Fitjar emphasised that these efforts are related to the core purposes and mission of a university (researching and teaching activities) and must necessarily be in alignment with global expectations. Leveraging on these dual global and local priorities in education highlights the relevance of an adaptive ranking system - one with the capacity to recognise, accept, and realistically evaluate a university's contributions in these two dimensions. This paper explores critically, regional rankings and their strategic roles in the harmonisation of local educational goals with global priorities and standards. With this comes the emphasis on an educational model that is capable of manifesting a blend of qualities and potentials to address both regional developmental needs and international academic expectations.

Understanding the Concept of University Rankings

University ranking, also known as league tables is the systematic assessment and comparative evaluation of higher educational institutions based on a set of predefined performance indicators. The compilation of relative positions of universities during this exercise is tailored to recognise the purpose of ranking, and to align with appropriately selected methodology and scope; the overall aim is to assess performance and quality of universities around the world or in a specific region, country or local area (UniRank, 2023). Information that is produced during ranking are made available to the public through various publication platforms. UniRank added that university rankings publishers can be non-profit government and public organisations, for-profit private companies such as education consulting firms and media outlets (magazines, newspapers, websites) or academics within higher educational institutions.

University ranking methodology varies widely. Most ranking systems favour the more traditional quantitative metrics; however, Hazelkorn (as cited in Leong & Zhang, 2024) is advocating for the integration of the alternative (qualitative) assessments like peer reviews, stakeholder surveys and case studies. In practice, while some ranking systems rely heavily on published literature and

referenced citations, others lean towards the use of surveys, institutional self-reports, and performance-based funding metrics (UniRanks, 2023).

Based on coverage space, university rankings can be categorised into the following:

- (a) those in the group where participating institutions are drawn all over the world (global or international rankings),
- (b) those in the group where participating institutions come from selected geographical locations (this could be regional, country or local rankings), and
- (c) those in groups where participating institutions are engaged in similar educational programmes, courses or fields of study (specialised rankings).

In the viewpoint of UniRank Team (2023), the regional university ranking model describes a situation where participating institutions are located in countries of a specific geographical or political region or in locations that are demarcated on the basis of any other criteria like language). Furthermore, UniRank is of the opinion that country university rankings are devoted to institutions that are located in the same country while local university rankings focuses on institutions that are in the same administrative division of a country, state, region, province or cities). Each ranking model is designed to measure various dimensions of university performances.

In the aspect of assessment criteria, university rankings take into account a range of academic related criteria (such as academic research output, academic and employer reputation, academic ratios, teaching quality, internationalisation) and non-academic criteria like web presence and institutional popularity, students' learning experience) and other performance indicators. Shin and Toutkoushian (2021) emphasised that the validity and reliability of rankings depend largely on the appropriateness of indicators and the transparency of data collection methods.

At its core, university ranking serves three major purposes. First, university ranking acts as a quality assurance tool by providing benchmarks that allow institutions to assess their strengths and identify areas needing improvement; second, rankings foster transparency and accountability in the higher education sector by offering accessible information to the public (Hazelkorn, 2018). Thirdly, Hazelkorn maintained that university rankings is an influencer of institutional behaviours and strategic planning since they often adjust their policies and priorities to improve their performance positions. In all, it can be stated that rankings make the world of higher educational institutions dynamic while setting up competition among them; thus, they encourage innovative practices, pursuit of excellence, boost engagement activities and alignment with standard educational practices.

Global (World or International) University Rankings

The focus of global university rankings is on higher educational institutions that can be located in any country of the world (UniRank, 2025). This model of ranking is an influential tool that is used for the evaluation of quality and reputation of higher educational institutions worldwide. It offers comparative insights about the performance of universities in teaching, research, industry collaboration, and international outlook among others. Global university rankings typically emphasises on research impacts, publications and referenced citations, international faculty/student ratio, and academic reputation.

Global rankings serve various purposes but mainly, they inform prospective students, shape institutional strategies, influence government's funding, and foster international collaborations or partnerships. It has been however, criticised for tending to marginalise universities in developing countries since they prioritise on indicators that favour research-intensive institutions in wealthier nations (Salmi & Bassett, 2020). One of the major issues is the placed overemphasis on research outputs, seeming negligence of teaching quality, and display of regional biases; all of these tend to favour elite universities. In response to the limitations of global rankings, regional and national ranking systems have emerged to provide more context-sensitive comparative evaluations for higher educational institutions.

Major Global Ranking Bodies and Their Evaluation Criteria

Major global ranking bodies such as the Times Higher Education (THE), QS World University Rankings, and Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) variously adopt distinctive methodologies and performance indicators to evaluate institutions and provide yearly updates that guide students, policymakers, and institutions.

Table 1: Major Global Ranking Bodies and Their Criteria

Ranking Body	Key Indicators Used	Weighting (Approximate)
THE (Times Higher Education)	Teaching (30%), Research (30%), Citations (30%), International Outlook (7.5%), Industry Income (2.5%)	Teaching and Research are central
QS World University Rankings	Academic Reputation (40%), Employer Reputation (10%), Faculty/Student Ratio (20%), Citations per Faculty (20%), International Faculty/Students (10%)	Reputation plays a dominant role
ARWU (Shanghai Ranking)	Alumni and Staff Winning Nobel Prizes (30%), Highly Cited Researchers (20%), Papers in Nature/Science (20%), Per Capita Performance (10%), Research Output (20%)	Focuses heavily on research excellence

Source: Times Higher Education, QS World University Rankings, ARWU (2024).

As shown in Table 1, teaching and research are central for THE, while reputation plays a dominant role in QS World University Rankings, and for ARWU (Shanghai Ranking), the most important criteria is research excellence. Relatedly and with a cursory look at the recent publications by the major global ranking bodies, Harvard University, MIT, and Stanford consistently appear in the top five across all ranking platforms due to outstanding research achievements, global influence, and academic reputation (Times Higher Education, 2024; QS World University Rankings, 2024, ARWU, 2024). Similarly, universities in the UK like Oxford and Cambridge also maintain strong global position. The National University of Singapore (NUS) and ETH Zurich represent top-performing institutions outside the U.S. and UK. This can be taken as a showcase of global exclusion for many other categories of educational institutions.

Adapting Rankings to Local Education Landscape

While global rankings have provided benchmarks for excellent performance and international visibility, they often employ evaluation criteria that may not fully align with the priorities, challenges,

or missions of institutions in different regions. Hazelkorn (2015) maintained that rankings should reflect a diversity of missions and need not impose a one-size-fits-all model of success. To arrive at a more inclusive and equitable ranking relays the need for adaptation and purposeful inclination to local educational landscapes. Worthy to mention is the fact that educational landscapes are shaped by diverse socio-economic realities, developmental goals, political dictations, governance structures, and cultural values. The reality is that many publicly owned African and West African universities, are experiencing resource constraints. This automatically reduces the capacity of these institutions and eligibility or chances of being able to compete with world-class universities. At the same time, they are driven by the passion to expand access to education, while struggling with how to improve teaching and learning quality, boost entrepreneurship, and address regional challenges such as poverty, inadequacies in health-care, and food security. It is obvious that global ranking systems may fail to capture the aforementioned aspects.

As pointed out by Hazelkorn (2015) and Altbach et al. (2009), global rankings tend to offer advantageous privileges to the well-established, research-intensive universities, often overlooks the fact that such categories of institutions are important in local developments although they are less visible internationally. This state of affairs has sparked debates around the validity and applicability of global rankings for institutions whose missions are more locally oriented. In response to these concerns, the Times Higher Education Sub-Saharan Africa University Rankings have taken a significant step towards adapting to suit regional dimensions. These global rankings bodies now feature indicators that are tailored to the African context. Such efforts may ensure that a university's excellent performance is defined not only by global visibility, but also by tangible contributions to local and national developments.

Regional University Ranking and Systems

The Concept of Region

To Sinz (2018), the term 'region' convey meanings that vary with contexts - which could be scientific, political, cultural or socio-economic. In this paper and in a more general sense, a region is any space (large portion on the earth's surface) with similar operating conditions and consolidating attributes (features) or characteristics that distinguishes it from another. From this perspective, a region can be identified by its distinguishing internal features. Thus, a region is set and modified by local contextual factors like cultural, social, economic, political, religious, language and environmental characteristics; they as well constitute the defining criteria. These defining attributes or characteristics of a region can be natural, generated by man or by interactions between man and the environment. In sum, a region can be considered to be a functional unit for geographical, social, cultural (Dictionary.com, LLC, 2025) or political, religious and any other reasons. In practice, the idea of region is used to demarcate the world into units or parts that can be as big or as small as needed for specific purposes. This explains why a regions is not necessarily set on the basis of size. Thus, a region can be used to describe areas like the parts of a country (city, suburb, group of suburbs), a country, several countries, parts of a continent or a continent. In sum, a region can exist within a country and as well, in a continent.

Kempton (2021) sums it up that each region is naturally different, this being the consequence of physical/geographic conditions, relief, climate, hydrography, vegetation, the potential of natural

resources, economic occupation available labour, infrastructure. It may no be wrong to state that the peculiar socio-economic characteristics of each region (which also translates into commercial and industrial activities) tends to initiate and influence partnership and other cooperative relationships with educational institutions, this may induce the adoption of strategies and actions that can favour regional developments.

Regional Rankings of Universities

Regional rankings of educational institutions have emerged as the mechanism for assessing and comparing academic performance, infrastructure, research outputs, and students' satisfaction within specific geographical contexts (Uniranks, 2025). As such, this model of ranking generally highlights local educational strengths and challenges and as well evaluate how well they are fairing in these regional priorities and in alignment with global academic standard of performance. The regional model of rankings typically considers local educational priorities such as community impacts, access of the locals to education, and relevance of academic programs to regional developmental needs. Unlike global rankings that often prioritises on research outputs and global visibility, regional rankings emphasises on factors that are regionally relevant—such as local engagement, teaching quality, and societal impact—while still aligning with international academic standards. Thus, Marginson (2019) mentioned that regional rankings offer a more inclusive framework, where a wider array of universities can prove their excellence based on uniquely set missions, socio-political and economic contexts. No doubt, many African and Southeast Asian universities must be grappling with limited funding, infrastructural deficits, and high demand for access (Mohamedbhai, 2020); this tends to limit their chances of being able to meet up with the performance criteria of global ranking systems.

Regional rankings also provide smaller or developing institutions with a platform to be recognised within their own educational ecosystems. Thus, they allows institutions to flourish based on their local mandates while still aligning with international standards. **In sum, regional rankings serve as recognition tools for the highly rated higher educational institutions, they guide their strategic restructuring, policy modifications, international collaborations, and global competitive initiatives from all corners of the world (Lol, 2014).** Table 2 highlights the differentiating features of global and regional university rankings in terms of coverage, emphasis, perspectives, dominating institutions, and alignment with local labour needs.

Table 2: Differentiating Features in Global and Regional University Rankings

Features	Global Ranking	Regional Ranking
Coverage	Global, participating institutions are located in any parts of the world	Localised, participating institutions are located in specific countries, or regions or in areas demarcated on specific criteria
Research Emphasis	Intensive and comprehensive, with more interest in faculty citations and global reputation	Moderate to low in depth

	Less aligned	More Aligned
Relevance to Local job Market and Linkages		
Focus on Teaching and Learning Quality	Low priority, with emphasis on the link between teaching and research	High priority, with emphasis on teaching and learning for acquisition of employability skills and competencies
University Representation	Dominated by top-tier global universities	Inclusive of emerging universities
International Perspectives	More Focused, emphasis is on high international student ratio, faculty diversity and global partnerships	Less focused, emphasis is on students in the region

Adapted From UniRanks (2025)

Regional university rankings play a crucial role in shaping the perceptions of key stakeholders students, parents, employers, government agencies, and development partners by providing localised indicators that reflect the real strengths and impact of institutions within their socio-cultural context. Unlike global rankings that often emphasises on research prestige and international visibility, regional rankings highlight accessible, community-engaged, and context-relevant performance metrics (Hazelkorn & Mihut, 2022). For prospective students and parents, regional rankings offer culturally familiar and geographically relevant frameworks that could inform choice of schools. This is important in contexts where global rankings may not capture the quality of teaching or employability outcomes of regional institutions (Maringe & Ojo, 2022). Furthermore, employers of labour benefit from regional rankings as they spotlight on the quality of training graduates in locally applicable skills; the indication here is that the universities are aligning their outputs with labour market needs.

An important dimension is that regional rankings and the projected information tend to legitimise local and neighbouring institutions as viable alternatives to studying outside the considered location. This trend encourages 'brain circulation' rather than 'brain drain', as students stay within their region while gaining quality education, and can contribute later to national and regional developments (Knight, 2017).

Global and Regional Priorities of University Education

Universities are generally considered to have significant bearings on national, regional and developments, and global civilisations. This is a achieved through the mission of universities, which covers teaching and learning, research, and community service. Before now, most universities were more concerned about teaching and researching; with increase in societal engagements and associated purposeful interactions came the establishment of networking opportunities with host regions. While there might not be clear boundaries or limits to where scholars or scientists in a university can research, the depth and focus remains a primary function of the model of the institution.

The classification of modern universities into globally oriented research-intensive model and the

locally embedded regional model (Deephouse & Suchman, as cited in Pinheiro, 2013) is illuminating. Thus in terms of features and priorities, the globally oriented universities are -

- * more research conscious, with value placed on its depth and the relationship between teaching and research (the aim is general advancement of humanity),
- * inclined to academic excellence, international reputation, and leading international positions in wide fields of research.

The regional universities are -

- * more vocationally conscious,
- * prioritise on civic engagements with host community where their needs are accommodated in their programmes and activities,
- * inclined more to cooperation and partnering with local industries and actors for generation and application of contextually relevant knowledge and innovative ideas, and
- * seek to have effects on regional markets and developments by encouraging skill enhancements in individuals mainly to satisfy local employment needs.

Regional Rankings of Universities and the Major Regional Ranking Bodies

Regional university rankings provide a more balanced and equitable platforms for institutions that might not dominate in global rankings but excel within their national and regional contexts. The three most influential bodies that are involved in regional rankings are:

1. Times Higher Education (THE)
2. QS World University Rankings (QS)
3. Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)

Table 3: THE, QS and ARWU Global Ranking

	Rank	University	Country
1. Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings 2024	1	University of Oxford	United Kingdom
	2	Stanford University	United States
	3	Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)	United States
	4	Harvard University	United States
	5	University of Cambridge	United Kingdom
	6	Princeton University	United States
	7	California Institute of Technology (Caltech)	United States
	8	Imperial College London	United Kingdom
	9	University of California, Berkeley	United States
	10	Yale University	United States
	Rank	University	Country
	1	Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)	United States
	2	University of Cambridge	United Kingdom
	3	University of Oxford	United Kingdom

2. QS World University Rankings 2024	4	Harvard University	United States
	5	Stanford University	United States
	6	Imperial College London	United Kingdom
	7	ETH Zurich – Swiss Federal Institute of Technology	Switzerland
	8	National University of Singapore (NUS)	Singapore
	9	University College London (UCL)	United Kingdom
	10	University of California, Berkeley	United States
3. Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) 2024	Rank	University	Country
	1	Harvard University	United States
	2	Stanford University	United States
	3	Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)	United States
	4	University of Cambridge	United Kingdom
	5	University of California, Berkeley	United States
	6	Princeton University	United States
	7	Columbia University	United States
	8	California Institute of Technology	United States
	9	University of Chicago	United States
10	University of Oxford	United Kingdom	

(Source: Times Higher Education, QS World University Rankings, ARWU, 2024).

Table 3 presents the top 10 universities in the world according to three major ranking systems for 2024: THE, QS, and ARWU.

1. **THE World University Rankings (2024):** The University of Oxford (UK), the occupier of first position overall has maintained consistent dominance in global higher education. This is followed by Stanford University (USA) and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT, USA) at second and third respectively. Notably, eight of the top ten universities are based in the United States and the United Kingdom. This shows the maintained leadership position of these two countries' in global higher education.
2. **QS World University Rankings (2024):** The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT, USA) is on first place, reaffirming the maintained strong global reputation for excellence in science, technology, and innovation. The University of Cambridge (UK) and University of Oxford (UK) occupy the second and third spots, respectively. Interestingly, ETH Zurich (Switzerland) and the National University of Singapore (NUS) are also in the top 10 category, this is an indication of the growing strength of European and Asian institutions in the global arena.
3. **ARWU (2024):** Here, the Harvard University (USA) is on the first position, a ranking spot it traditionally holds. Stanford University (USA) and MIT (USA) followed with second and third positions. ARWU highlighted the more the dominance of U.S. based institutions, with

eight of them occupying spots within the top 10 while only the University of Cambridge (UK) and University of Oxford (UK) could break into the list.

Key Observations Across the Three Ranking Systems

- Harvard, Stanford, MIT, Oxford, and Cambridge universities consistently appear in the top 5 across all the ranking categories, though their exact positions vary.
- U.S. and U.K. universities dominate the global top 10, although institutions like ETH Zurich (Switzerland) and NUS (Singapore) are notable non-U.S./U.K. occupiers in the QS ranking system.
- Ranking methodologies differ; THE emphasises on teaching, research, citations, international outlook, and industry income. QS places more weight on academic and employer reputations, faculty/student ratio, as well as, internationalization. ARWU focuses heavily on research outputs, quality of education (Nobel Prizes, Fields Medals), and publications in high-impact journals.
- The University of California, Berkeley appears in the top 10 in all three ranking categories, this is an indication of strong research reputation and academic influence.

The African Regional Ranking

Tables 3, 4 and 5 present data from each of the major regional university ranking bodies, but with special attention to African and West African universities.

Times Higher Education (THE) Sub-Saharan Africa University Rankings 2024

The Times Higher Education (THE) Sub-Saharan Africa University Rankings 2024 evaluated 129 universities from 22 countries, using a methodology that was developed for assessing universities' impact on the region and involvement in addressing local challenges.

Table 4: Top 10 Universities in Sub-Saharan Africa

S/N	Rank of University	Country
1	University of Johannesburg	South Africa
2	University of Pretoria	South Africa
3	University of the Witwatersrand	South Africa
4	University of Global Health Equity	Rwanda
5	University of Ghana	Ghana
6	University of Rwanda	Rwanda
7	SIMAD University	Somalia
8	Makerere University	Uganda
9	Ashesi University	Ghana
10	University of KwaZulu-Natal	South Africa

Worthy to note from Table 4 is the fact that the **University of Ghana** secured the 5th position overall and was recognised as the top university in both Ghana and West Africa.

QS World University Rankings 2024: African Focus

The **QS World University Rankings** does not currently publish a dedicated regional ranking for

Africa. However, African universities are included in its global rankings. In the 2024 edition, several West African institutions were featured

Table 5: Selected West African Universities in QS World University Rankings (2024)

University	Country	QS World Rank
University of Ghana	Ghana	1001–1200
University of Ibadan	Nigeria	1201+
Obafemi Awolowo University	Nigeria	1201+

Note: Rankings are indicative and based on available data.

Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) 2024: African Representation

This ranking body, also known as the **Shanghai Ranking**, does not publish on region-specific dimensions. However, its global list features top-performing institutions from all regions. In the 2024 ARWU global ranking, the following African universities were featured:

Table 6: Selected African Universities in ARWU (2024)

World Rank	University	Country
201–300	University of Cape Town	South Africa
301–400	University of the Witwatersrand	South Africa
401–500	Stellenbosch University	South Africa
501–600	Cairo University	Egypt
601–700	University of Pretoria	South Africa

Note: No West African university was listed in the top 700

By adapting their criteria to reflect local goals, THE, QS and ARWU offered visibility to a broader spectrum of institutions across the world as shown in Tables 4, 5, and 6. These regional university ranking bodies provide good examples of contextual sensitivity. In these systems, metrics such as student-to-staff ratios, institutional commitment to access, and graduate employability within regional economies are prioritised (THE, 2024).

Global Standards Versus Regional Priorities of University Education

In recent decades, global university rankings have become a prominent tool for evaluating and comparing higher educational institutions across the world. These rankings rely on a set of standardised indicators to measure institutional performance. These typically include research outputs and impacts (as measured through citations), academic and employer reputation, international staff and students' presence, as well as partnerships with industry. However, while these global ranking systems are useful for benchmarking and promoting international competitiveness, they often fail to reflect the realities and priorities of universities in many regions, particularly those in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. As Hazelkorn (2015) and Marope et al. (2013) stated, such models reinforce a narrow, one-size-fits-all approach to excellence, one that may marginalise institutions with strong local mandates and less global visibility.

Furthermore, universities in regions such as West Africa frequently face very different imperatives. Their priorities are often focused on expansion of access to higher education, enhancement of teaching quality, promotion of equity, and responses to urgent socio-economic challenges within their immediate environments. For example, institutions in Nigeria and Ghana may emphasise producing skilled graduates for national development, fostering entrepreneurship, and addressing public health or agricultural issues. These efforts, though critical, may not necessarily translate into higher positions on global ranking tables as they may be placing more weight on research citations and reputational surveys.

This disconnect between global metrics and regional missions can lead to unintended consequences. Materu (2007) observed that the pressure to gain a higher position in global rankings can push some institutions to shift focus and direct scarce resources towards internationally recognised research areas; most often this could be done at the expense of teaching quality or community engagements. This trend can exacerbate inequities and hinder the realization of the primary developmental goals of universities in the region.

Fortunately, there seem to be a growing recognition of the need for more inclusive performance evaluation systems - one that can account for regional priorities. For instance, the Times Higher Education Sub-Saharan Africa University Rankings introduced in 2023 adopt a more regionally relevant framework. These rankings assess institutions based not only on research and international outlook but also on teaching quality, students' engagement, and societal impacts. Scholars such as Altbach et al. (2009) and Teferra and Altbach (2004) advocate for a pluralistic approach to higher education assessment in acknowledgement of missional diversities of institutions and differences in developmental contexts. When a singular definition of academic excellence is not promoted, ranking systems can take on a more balanced form, where both global competitiveness and local relevance are valued. By adopting such inclusive criteria, especially in underrepresented regions like West Africa, the higher education community can ensure that excellence is not only measured by international citations but also by real-world impacts.

Regional Rankings and Harmonisation of Local Educational Goals with Global Priorities

In the evolving landscape of higher education, regional university rankings have emerged as a pivotal mechanism for aligning local educational objectives with broader international performance standard and perspectives. This model of university rankings generally serve as an intermediary, enabling institutions to balance domestic developmental goals with the pursuit of international competitiveness. By so doing, regional rankings promote the transition of universities into globally competitive ones without losing sight of regional responsibilities. More specifically, regional rankings offer the following harmonisation qualities:

Instrument for Policy and Strategic Planning: Hazelkorn (2018) maintained that rankings, whether global or regional, are not just metrics of performance but also instruments of policy and strategic planning. They provide information that can be used by policymakers, administrators, and other stakeholders for assessment of the performance of educational institutions and as well, convey evidences for future-oriented decisions. Specifically, regional rankings can illuminate areas such as curriculum relevance, community engagements, and level of developmental contributions in the host

environment; these may not be strictly emphasised in global rankings. Unlike global rankings that may focus disproportionately on prestige indicators like Nobel laureates or international faculty ratios, Hazelkorn maintained that regional rankings present more localised benchmarks that reflect actual developmental goals.

The locally-oriented comparative performance assessments in regional rankings help institutions to remain rooted in the execution of their local responsibilities while they are working to meet up with global performance standards. For instance, a university that is domiciled in Africa may be targeting improvements in agriculture (outputs and processes) through the instrument of research, this objective is intended to address a local need but it will ensure that the research activities will meet up with international standards in terms of scientific rigours and impacts. The foregoing aligns with Marginson's (2019) position on the strategic functions of regional rankings in policy development, especially in developing regions.

High scores in regional rankings often serve to justify increased public investment in higher education, especially in underfunded areas like infrastructure, student support services, and academic staffing. It follows that if a national university is rated poorly in regional rankings due to poor faculty-student ratios or outdated curricula, this would serve as evidence to the policymakers while pointing out the areas that reforms and improvements in funding are urgently needed (Varghese, 2020). In countries like Australia, Brazil, and South Africa, regional ranking outcomes have been explicitly tied to funding models and quality assurance mechanisms (Hazelkorn, 2021). Thus, transparency and accountability in the allocation of scarce educational resources are enhanced. Furthermore, by aligning local educational objectives with global performance indicators, regional rankings become a policy mirror through which governments can evaluate their systems' responsiveness to changing socio-economic dynamics.

Tool for Global Competitiveness: Salmi and Bassett's (2020) position is that regional rankings can motivate institutions to strike a balance between local relevance and global competitiveness. By responding to local needs and indicators (employability of graduates, access and equity, and partnerships regional industries), institutions can simultaneously enhance local socio-economic developments while maintaining their standing in the global academic community through internationalisation and research collaborations. Through a university's regional involvement and cooperation with local industries, small to medium sized businesses enjoy the benefits of transfer of knowledge that is adapted for local needs and as well, the privileges of regional value chains (Skinz, 2021).

Lo's (2014) submission reflects the importance that Taiwan government is placing on university rankings as outputs from this exercise are taken to be indicative of the comparative performance of their local institutions to world-class universities and global standards. Thus, in order to increase competitiveness, university rankings dictate discourses in the country concerning global higher education and strategies for modifying the educational system.

Mechanism for Enhancement of Institutional Diversity and Relevance: Global university rankings, by design, reward institutions that excel in research outputs, particularly those that are

published in high-impact journals and can secure international collaborations. This structure inadvertently places the elite institutions in privileged positions while others become marginalised for focusing more on teaching, regional researching, and making societal impacts. Regional rankings is designed to mitigate this bias by enabling institutions to compete within similar socio-economic and cultural ecosystems. For example, universities in Sub-Saharan Africa or Latin America often prioritise undergraduate education, agricultural innovation, or public health outreach over publishing in top-tier journals. These regional strengths are critical for national development but are rarely recognised in global rankings (Teferra, 2019).

Furthermore, regional rankings encourage institutions to specialise in areas where they have a comparative advantage. A university in West Africa may become a leader in tropical medicine, while their Southeast Asian counterpart may excel in climate adaptation technologies. Thus, this model of ranking fosters diversity within global academia by resisting the homogenising pressures of global rankings that tends to push all universities towards the research-intensive model (Salmi, 2020). As regional rankings highlight the distinct missions of local universities, they validate the efforts that are being made by institutions to meet the needs of their communities instead of just conforming with externally imposed standards. It can be said that with time, this will result in the realisation of a more equitable global higher education landscape.

Catalyst for Institutional Reforms: Regional rankings contribute significantly to strengthening institutional transparency and their quality assurance mechanisms since they demand the collection, verification, and dissemination of reliable data on locally relevant performance indicators (Hazelkorn, 2022). This structured data-gathering process compels institutions to develop internal monitoring systems, which in turn fosters a culture of accountability and continuous self-evaluation. In many regions where data quality and availability have historically been weak, the adoption of standardised ranking frameworks stimulates improvement in information management systems. This allows stakeholders—students, faculty, policymakers, and funders—to make informed decisions based on credible evidence (Sawahel, 2021). Furthermore, publicly available ranking data increases transparency, reduces the risks of corruption, and ensures that university resources are used efficiently to achieve institutional goals.

As emphasised by Outlook India (2023), when regional rankings are designed to reflect localised educational priorities, they help institutions to align their strategic planning and performance management efforts in better ways. These alignments ultimately enhances trust and confidence in the higher education system. For countries that lack the resources to compete in global rankings, regional rankings provide a more realistic and meaningful avenue to benchmark progress. This can catalyse and strengthen institutional reforms that are directed at quality assurance, innovation, and capacity building; these are essential and may have bearings on the attainment of some of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in education. It can be argued that the regional ranking model encourages regional actors to improve on their level of educational performances and quality. Institutions are put in a position where they have to follow up with global scientific trends or developments and to track the transformational effects in their regions.

Mechanism for Holistic Evaluation of Institutional Performance: Regional rankings helps to

reduce the seeming overemphasis on research-heavy metrics that dominates global rankings. Factors like teaching quality, students' satisfaction, and institutional contributions to regional development take deserved attention in regional rankings (Shin & Toutkoushian (2021); they as well foster a more holistic view of educational excellence. This broader framework encourages institutions to develop comprehensive strategies that can improve their global visibility while also being able to make local impacts.

Ultimately, regional ranking model help institutions to sustain cultural and contextual relevance while encouraging innovation, excellence, and global academic engagements. As more regions adopt and refine their ranking systems, the potential for improving quality and equity in education at both local and global scales becomes more feasible. Moreover, comparative assessments of institutions in different regions or communities permits the classification of developments and situations on site, this is essential in the definition of global strategic parameters of value.

Mechanism for Collaboration and Knowledge Exchange: Regional rankings foster collaborative ecosystems across institutions with shared geographical, linguistic, or socio-political backgrounds. These collaborations often takes the form of joint degree programmes, faculty exchanges, collaborative research projects, and regional conferences. Such initiatives deepen academic partnerships and reduce the isolation of institutions especially those from lower-income or remote regions (Teferra, 2019).

Universities in the Arab world, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia, for example, are increasingly forming consortia that respond to region-specific challenges. Specifically, universities in North Africa and the Middle East are collaborating on researching into water scarcity, desertification, and sustainable agriculture, these are highly relevant in their contexts but often underrepresented in global research funding (Altbach & de Wit, 2021). Similarly, in Southeast Asia, regional cooperation is growing in digital education and climate change adaptation, this is promoted by organisations like the ASEAN University Network through roles that are fashioned to harmonise educational standards and to foster cross-border collaborations that will address shared regional priorities (Teferra, 2023; ASEAN University Network, 2022). Regional rankings provide a framework for collaborative engagements by identifying comparative strengths, fostering peer learning, and encouraging institutions to work together in raising collective standards (Mohamedbhai, 2020).

Tool for Equity and Academic Excellence: One of the defining advantages of regional rankings is the ability to balance the twin imperatives of academic excellence and social equity. By incorporating performance metrics related to inclusion, access, and societal impacts, rankings position universities as agents of national transformation and tools for community development and not just as a platform for global competition. For example, institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, or Latin America may be recognised for initiating efforts that can improve access to education in marginalised communities, promotion of gender equity, or preservation of indigenous languages and knowledge systems. These aspects are often overlooked in global rankings but are critical to sustainable development and educational justice in these regions (Zezeza, 2020; Teferra, 2019).

This model of university ranking has expanded the scope of assessment to include equity-driven innovation, localised curriculum relevance, and contributions to national capacity building (Varghese, 2020). This encourages institutions to remain grounded in local realities while aspiring to meet international standard; ultimately this promotes a more inclusive and diversified global higher education system.

Driver of Economic and Social Developments: Regional universities are often the backbone of their communities, acting as engines for economic revitalisation and social transformation. Unlike elite institutions that may be geographically and socially distant from the average citizens, regional universities tend to engage more directly in solving local problems through applied research, entrepreneurship programs, and community partnerships (Altbach & Salmi, 2018).

In highlighting contributions to job creation, innovation, and public services, regional university rankings encourage universities to align their mission with national developmental priorities. This is particularly important in developing regions where universities are not only viewed as centres of learning but also, they are the drivers of industrial growth, health innovation, agricultural modernisation, and policy developments (Scholars Strategy Network, 2021). For example, a university that is located in a rural region may focus more on sustainable agriculture or local manufacturing, thereby boosting employment and improving livelihoods.

Furthermore, rankings that reward universities for addressing social inequities—such as improving access to education for the marginalised groups or advancing gender equity in effect are amplifying the global objective of higher education as the means of inclusive developments (Tandon, 2020). This encourages the governments and partners to invest more strategically in institutions that generate measurable socio-economic impacts.

Impact of Regional Rankings on Higher Education in Africa and West Africa

The emergence of regional university ranking model appears to have significantly influenced the higher education landscape in Africa and particularly, West Africa. It appears to be setting a track for rebalancing the global narratives of universities in Africa. Currently, most times, African universities have been underrepresented in global rankings because their evaluation metrics often fail to reflect the realities of these institutions who on the contrary are more focused on access, local relevance, and societal developments (Hazelkorn 2015; Altbach & Salmi 2011).

Looking at global rankings, only a handful of African universities consistently feature in the top tiers. With this, most universities in West Africa and Africa at large appear in the lower bands. For example, according to the THE World University Rankings 2024, institutions like the University of Lagos and University of Ibadan are positioned in the 1001+ band (THE 2024). However, with regional ranking model and forms such as THE Sub-Saharan Africa University Rankings, universities, West African universities such as Ashesi University (Ghana), Covenant University (Nigeria), and the University of Ghana have gained recognition since the performance assessment indicators aligns more with teaching quality, students' engagement, and social impacts (THE 2023).

Barriers to Competitive Positioning of Universities in Africa

The limited performance of West African universities and in Africa at large can be attributed to the following systemic issues among others:

Funding Constraints: Institutions in the region often operate under chronic underfunding. National education budgets rarely meet up with the UNESCO-recommended minimum of 6% of a country's GDP. The tend to rely more on subventions from the government and often display limited institutional autonomy and planning capacity (Altbach and Salmi 2011; NUC 2022).

Infrastructural Deficiencies: Many campuses suffer from poor physical infrastructure, inadequate laboratory and library resources, and limited internet connectivity; these deficiencies hinder teaching and research (World Bank 2020).

Academic Staffing Challenges: The shortage of qualified academic staff and the brain drain phenomenon have contributed to high student-to-staff ratios and low research productivity. Opportunities for professional development and international collaboration are also limited (Hazelkorn, 2015).

Low Research Outputs: Most academics from higher educational institutions in Africa are unable to publish in high-impact journals due to constraints in funding, mentorship, and access to global research networks (Altbach and Salmi 2011).

Strategies and Policy Interventions for Repositioning of African Universities

Amongst others, the following are important:

Quality Assurance Initiatives: One critical area of progress is the development of quality assurance initiatives. Bodies such as the National Universities Commission (NUC) in Nigeria and the African Quality Rating Mechanism (AQRM) have introduced comprehensive frameworks designed to standardise university performance across the continent. These frameworks emphasise on institutional accountability, curriculum relevance, and students' learning outcomes, all of these are geared toward improving educational quality and regional competitiveness (NUC 2022).

International Support and Investments: Another notable advancement is the influx of international support and investment. The World Bank's African Centre of Excellence (ACE) project, for example, has played a transformative role by boosting postgraduate education and applied research in priority fields such as agriculture, health, and information and communication technology (ICT). Through targeted funding, technical assistance, and partnerships, the ACE initiative has significantly enhanced research capacity and innovation capabilities among the participating universities (World Bank 2020).

ICT and Digital Learning Expansions: ICT and digital learning expansions have also been a key area of improvement. Leading institutions such as Obafemi Awolowo University and the University of Ilorin have made strategic investments in digital infrastructure, the aims are to broaden learning access, increase efficiency, and modernise educational delivery. These efforts are in response to the growing demand for flexible and technology-driven education.

Strategic Data Management: Many higher educational institutions are strengthening strategic data management practices. The establishment of ranking and planning offices within institutions reflects the growing awareness of the need to systematically monitor key performance indicators. By tracking and analysing institutional data, universities can better position themselves for improved outcomes in both regional and global rankings (Times Higher Education, 2023).

Strategies for Strengthening Regional University Rankings

Regional rankings can be more meaningful, reliable, and impactful with the following strategies:

1. Development of Regional-Specific Frameworks

With the development of frameworks and indicators that are specifically tailored to a specific location, regional rankings will reflect the unique educational, socio-economic, and cultural priorities of the region. For instance, in regions where universities play a major role in social development, criteria such as community engagement, local employability of graduates, and contributions to regional innovation should be weighted heavily. A regional-specific framework ensures that rankings are more contextually relevant, fair, and supportive of regional developmental goals (Hazelkorn, 2015).

2. Encouragement of Transparency and Fairness in Ranking Processes

Ranking bodies must clearly define their methodologies, criteria, and data sources in order to maintain credibility and trust among institutions and stakeholders. Furthermore, the mechanisms for independent auditing and validation of data should be instituted to prevent manipulation or misreporting. Transparency not only enhances the legitimacy of regional rankings but also motivates institutions to genuinely improve on their performance instead of merely working to climb the ranking ladder artificially (Salmi, 2017).

3. Promotion of Collaboration among Regional Universities

Instead of fostering unhealthy competition, regional rankings can be encouraged to increase collaborative efforts among universities. This can be achieved through joint research initiatives, academic exchange programmes, sharing of developmental resources and coordinating efforts to tackle regional challenges. Through collaboration, institutions can pool resources together, share best practices, improve on research activities, and collectively raise the standard of education within the region. The strengthening of collaborations also enable smaller or less-resource endowed universities to benefit from partnering with stronger institutions, thus narrowing disparities within regions (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

4. Investment in Research and Infrastructure

Sustainable improvement in regional rankings requires significant investment in research and institutional infrastructure. This may be requiring the Government, private sectors, and international developmental partners to prioritise on sponsorship of institutional researches, funding for provision of laboratory facilities, ICT infrastructure, libraries, and innovation hubs. Without a strong research and physical infrastructural base, universities will struggle to meet up with even the minimum standards required for meaningful regional or global recognitions. Investment in research not only boost a university's ranking scores but also enhances the capacity to address local and global societal challenges (World Bank, 2020; Adeleke & Emunemu, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Improving the capacity of ranking dwells on finding the sphere where university performance indicators recognise both global engagements and local responsibilities. Through regional ranking systems, universities are presented with an opportunity to be evaluated on how well they are thriving, connecting, engaging and supporting communities, local institutions and businesses and in a time of rapid globalisation. By harmonising global aspirations with local priorities, universities are in a position to create dynamic learning environments that serve both their communities and the broader world. Here, the aim of ranking is to directly provide relatively similar parameters for evaluating the

contributions of universities in a given region in terms of their progress, achievements as well as, global standing. The regional ranking model helps to foster a generation of universities who can match the assessment criteria of being able to produce individuals that can think globally, act locally, and contribute meaningfully to an inclusive world. Ultimately, regional ranking systems have the pivotal role of helping mankind to realise the vision of an inclusive world. Worthy to note is the fact that systemic challenges such as limited funding, issues of insufficient staffing, inadequate infrastructure and low capacity for research have continued to limit the performance of many universities during global and regional rankings. No doubt, these challenges can be addressed through deliberate strategic actions. With the adoption of an inclusive evaluation standards, rankings can become the driver of excellence, a platform to showcase equity, and relevance of university education across all regions and the world.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are proposed for the enhancement of university ranking systems in Africa and particularly in West Africa:

1. Regional ranking bodies should continue to expand evaluation frameworks to reflect the realities and developmental priorities of African and West African universities. Metrics such as graduate employability, community impact, innovation in teaching, and contributions to national development should be weighted more significantly along with the traditional research-focused indicators.
2. Universities should establish dedicated offices or units to undertake relevant data collection, analysis, and reporting on behalf of their institutions to the ranking agencies. Building internal expertise in data management will also help institutions to align strategically with both global and regional benchmarks.
3. Governments in African countries and other stakeholders of education improve on institutional funding as this will boost investments in infrastructure, staff development, and research. The idea is to improve quality and as well, enhance global competitiveness and regional relevance among the universities.
4. Institutions should be encouraged to collaborate with each other in their regions or continent at large in order to facilitate the sharing of best practices, benchmarking of performance, and jointly addressing shared challenges. This strategy can be used to address issues of brain drain, sub-standard curriculum, and digital deficiencies.
5. The national ministries of education and university governing councils should adopt the outcomes of ranking as one of the quality assurance indicators. Ranking and demands should be accommodated during strategic planning and accreditation processes. Here, rankings will serve prestige purposes while being used as tools for continuous improvement and performance monitoring.
6. While pursuing international visibility, the universities in each region should highlight their unique strengths, especially in locally relevant researches, indigenous knowledge generating systems, and community-based outreaches as matters of competitive advantages in global academic discourse.
7. African academic leaders and policy-makers should actively engage with global ranking organisations (THE, QS, ARWU) to advocate for the inclusion of more equitable and diverse indicators, especially those that recognise non-traditional forms of academic excellence.

8. Universities should monitor how rankings influence their decisions while working towards ensuring that institutional reforms are driven by ranking aspirations and as well, the need to be student-centered, contextually aligned, and ethically sound.

KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

1. **Region:** This describes specifically demarcated areas which could be parts of a country (city, suburb, group of suburbs), a country, several countries, parts of a continent or a continent.
2. **Global University Ranking:** This describes a model of university ranking with focus on comparative assessment and positioning of universities all over the world in terms of performance and quality of service.
3. **Regional University Rankings:** This model of ranking refers to the comparative assessment of universities within a specifically demarcated space in terms of distinctive and contextually relevant criteria.
4. **Global Educational Priorities of Universities:** This refers to the dimensions of priorities, attention and interests of globally oriented universities.
5. **Regional Educational Priorities of Universities:** This is used to describe dimensions of priorities, attention and interests of locally embedded, regional oriented universities.
5. **University Ranking Criteria:** These are key performance indicators that are considered during the comparative assessment of universities.
7. **Ranking Bodies:** These are organisations who adopt distinctive methodologies and performance indicators to evaluate universities and to provide yearly updates that can guide students, policymakers, and institutions.

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