

REPUTATIONAL IMPACTS OF INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

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3.3. International ranking of UK universities

There are different global indices – such as the Times Higher Education ranking, Guardian Ranking, and QS Ranking - that rank universities based on their engagement in teaching, research, and third-stream activities. Even though these rankings are subjective and sometimes criticised for the lack of consideration of the unique characteristics of certain universities and the difficulties in measuring many areas in which universities make a contribution, the rankings are generally perceived by potential students and their employers, potential collaborators and employees of universities, and other stakeholders as a measure of reputation. Unlike other mechanisms discussed so far, ranking does not involve international R&I but ranking does generate reputational impacts, such as financial, relational, resource, research and innovation, which are discussed in this section of the report [Figure 3.3].

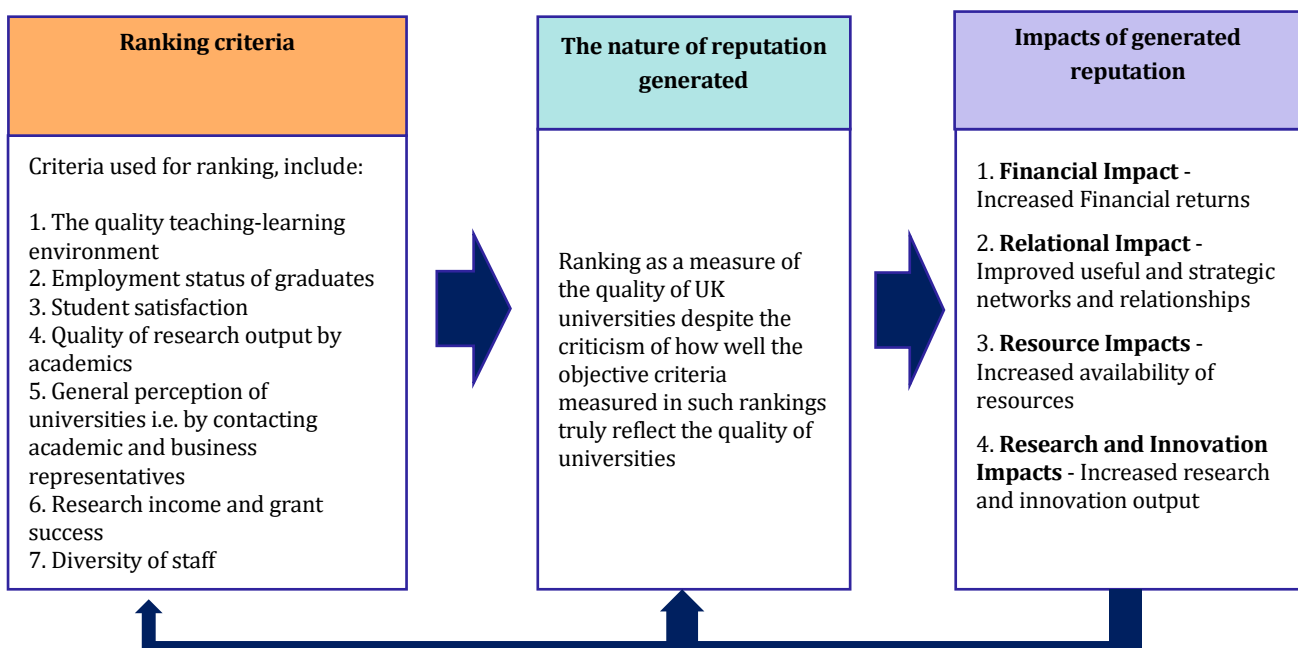


Figure 3.3: International ranking of UK universities generating reputational impacts

3.3.1. Reputational Impacts of UK University Ranking

The UK has built a robust reputation for its Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) by excelling in various global ranking criteria that highlight the quality and effectiveness of teaching and research rigour and enhance their competitiveness to establish themselves as esteemed centres of learning and research. Numerous agencies undertake the ranking of institutions using various criteria, fostering healthy competition and helping identify premier institutions for prospective learners (Aithal & Kumar, 2020). This reputation through ranking has been built on several key factors including the quality of the teaching-learning environment, employment status of graduates, student satisfaction, quality of research output by academics, general perception by academic and business representatives, research income and grant success, and the diversity of staff (Times Higher Education ranking, Guardian Ranking, and QS Ranking).

The UK's reputation as a leading destination for international students is reflected in its ranking as the world's second most popular destination for international students, following the US (Hubble & Bolton, 2021). During the academic year 2019/20, non-European Union international students comprised 22 per cent of the total student body in UK universities, marking a threefold increase since the start of the twenty-first century (HESA 2021; Universities UK, 2022). Yet, after Brexit since EU students were considered international and required to pay international fees, there was a significant drop in EU students. In the 2022/23 academic year, EU students made up approximately 3.2% of the total student population in UK universities (HESA 2024).

Both ranking and long-term perception of the prestige of universities seem to have a collective influence on reputation (Hazelkorn 2015). Despite annual fluctuations in rankings, reputational prestige has an anchoring effect, suggesting that longstanding reputations continue to influence student enrolment (Bastedo & Bowman, 2011; Taylor & Braddock, 2007). While the long-term prestige affects national student attraction, the perception of quality and prestige attached to high rankings attracts international students, who lack knowledge of prestige and local perception (Soysal, et al., 2024). High-quality academics tend to join institutions with better rankings for strong research outputs and reputational prestige (Enders, 2015; Taylor & Braddock, 2007), which, in turn, enhances the quality of the university's academic environment and research capabilities and leads to maintaining a higher ranking and competitive advantage for UK universities. Highly-ranked universities such as Oxford, Cambridge, and Imperial College are often seen as the most desirable partners for international collaborations, which further enhance their global influence and reputation (Mamrginson, 2014).

Data from the Complete University Guide (CUG) indicates that while rankings influence international student mobility, the role of ranking may be overestimated, implying that other factors such as general

perception of universities are also crucial (Soysal, et al., 2024). As a proxy for reputation, rankings have become an integral part of 'status culture' (Mamrginson, 2014).

Table 3.3: Impacts of reputation generated through international ranking of UK universities

Types of Impact	Specific Impacts
1. Financial Impact - Increased Financial returns	Improved student enrollment and research collaboration opportunities, positively associated with rankings, increase income of universities and research centres
2. Relational Impact - Improved useful and strategic networks and relationships	International student enrolment is significantly positively associated with university ranking Better ranking attracts international, high-quality academics to respective universities
3. Resource Impacts - Increased availability of resources	Global university rankings are used by collaborators when inviting for joint infrastructure development
4. Research and Innovation Impacts - Increased research and innovation output	Global university rankings are used when identifying universities invited for collaborations

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