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# Webometrics Ranking of World Universities: Politics of Knowledge

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## Abstract

*The Webometrics Ranking of World Universities, an initiative of the Cybermetrics Lab, is a unique endeavor that evaluates the global standing of Universities based on their web presence and online impact. This abstract provides a glimpse into the methodology, significance, and implications of the Webometrics ranking, shedding light on its relevance in today's digital age. This study was conducted using the doctrinal research design which is a black letter research design. The study discovered that webometrics ranking employs a comprehensive approach to evaluate universities' online visibility and impact. In addition, the study addressed webometrics ranking in the evolving landscape of education and research in this current digital era. The study concludes that an institution's web presence is a vital aspect of its global influence, enabling academic exchange, research dissemination, and collaboration. In addition, the webometrics ranking intersects with the politics of knowledge, as digital visibility becomes a currency for academic recognition. The ranking influences how universities are perceived internationally, potentially reinforcing hierarchies that marginalize institutions from developing regions. The study recommends that Universities should enhance their ranking through their digital strategies, ensuring that valuable educational and research resources are easily accessible to a global audience.*

**Keyword:** Academics institutions, Ranking system, University, Webometrics.

## 1.1. Introduction

Upon induction into the academia, the mantra 'publish or perish' is chanted, recited, repeated and sung until the theme which the mantra seeks to communicate to a young entrant in the teaching profession is assimilated, inculcated and implemented.

In recent years and in the light of technological advancements, the changing face of education and the ever fluid measurement of excellence, the aphorism, publish or perish, is beginning to take on a new meaning. Imbedded in that simple phrase are truths and principles that ultimately determine the success of an academic's career or the woeful end of it. The origin of the phrase 'publish or perish' is unknown,[1] but its truths remain timeless. De Rond and Miller have described it as an aphorism 'Venerated by many and dreaded by more'.[2] It may be described as a principle which describes an academic's success as firmly hinged on his success in publishing.[3]

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[1] IA Moosa, 'Publish or Perish: Origin and Perceived Benefits' <https://www.elgaronline.com/view/9781786434920/chapter01.xhtml> accessed 30 June 2023.

[2] MD Rond and AN Miller, 'Publish or Perish; Bane or Boon of Academic Life?' (2005) 14 *Journal of Management Inquiry 321.*

[3] Ibid 322; TC Almind and P Ingwersen, 'Informetric Analyses on the World Wide Web: Methodological approaches to "Webometrics"' (1997) 53 *Journal of Documentation* 404.

Currently, Universities ranking has become a critical and tool for calculating and measuring the quality and performance of Universities. It has become an indispensable barometer for gauging academic excellence. Consequently, academics, students, regulators in the education sector, policy makers and the government rely on the rankings in decision making. An institution's high ranking has the potential to attract funding and grants both nationally and internationally. In a country like Nigeria, it is highly probable that the regulator of the legal education; the Council of Legal Education, may be influenced by the results of Universities ranking in increasing or reducing a law faculty's quota for the Law School.

### 2.1. What is University Ranking?

Over the past three (3) decades, the global ranking of Universities was not as predominant as it has been in the past decade. Ranking is not a new practice for Universities and higher educational institutions around the globe.[4]Ranking has become very vital to the extent that it influences the quality and character of institutions, and the general institutional output. This makes ranking the center of attraction for institutions,[5] as strategies have been implemented by institutions to improve institutional ranking, monitor the performances of peer institutions, set institutional priorities and allocate resources.[6]To this end, global ranking of universities provides nations with the opportunity to assess the performance apparent in the competitive global knowledge economy.

Global University ranking plays a fundamental role in designing national policies of higher education, that is, to enhance the competence of universities or higher institutions of learning, and at the long run, building more advanced knowledge economy; helping prospective students and parents choose universities of study, and aid researchers and academics to search for new international collaborations.[7]

The practice of University Ranking has gotten little or limited definitions from literatures written by scholars, however, just a few scholarly works have made attempts to describe the practice in order to advance one's understanding of the phenomenon. According to Shin, University ranking is defined as a measure of organizational effectiveness.[8]Although this definition appears brief, yet it is apt as it captures the essence of University ranking, which is to examine and evaluate the effectiveness of organizational performance. A broader perspective to the definition of University ranking can be obtained from the definitions of Usher and Medow, who described the practice as a list of certain groupings of institutions (usually, but not always, within a single national jurisdiction), comparatively ranked in accordance with a mutual set of indicators in a descending pattern.[9]The interpretation of these definitions can be said to be the itemization of universities,

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[4] DIStuart, 'Reputational Rankings: Background and Development' (1995) 88 New Directions for Institutional Research 13. See also B Pusser and S Marginson, 'University Rankings in Critical Perspective' (2013) 84 *The Journal of Higher Education* 544.

[5] Hazelkorn opined that in some countries, ranking was understood as essential to institutional reputation and shaped virtually every aspect of institutional organization and governance.

[6] E Hazelkorn, 'Learning to live with League Tables and Ranking: The experience of Institutional Leaders' (2008) 21 Higher Education Policy 193.

[7] Z Dembereldorj, 'Review on the Impact of World Higher Education Rankings: Institutional Competitive Competence and Institutional Competence' (2018) 7 International Journal of Higher Education 25.

[8] JC Shin, 'Organizational effectiveness and University Rankings'<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-1116-7_2> accessed 29 June 2023.

[9] A Usher and J Medow, 'A Global Survey of University Rankings and League Tables' in BMKehm and B Stensaker (eds), *University Rankings, Diversity, and the New Landscape of Higher Education*(Sense Publisher 2009); M Thelwall, 'The Data Web Impact Cycle of Webometric Research and its Changes with the Introduction of Google Scholar Citations and Microsoft Academic' (2018) 69 *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 772; X Li, M Thelwall and K Kousha, 'Assessing the Citation impact of Books: The Role of Google

national, continental and even international, according to their performance, services and quality, with the agendum to influence and keep the public informed on the quality, rating and preference in the choice and classification of universities. Ranking has been viewed as a comparison of higher education institutions, specifically the research oriented universities.[10] To Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley, ranking compares countries, individual universities and fields of study.[11]

The definitions considered above begs the questions: Who sets the criteria for ranking? Can all universities be effectively ranked applying the same standards? Who decides the rank for each university? What is the agendum of University Ranking, competition or information? What fate befalls those Universities not ranked high? Does this criterion for ranking take cognisance of the teaching sagacity of the University? Does the university ranking breed inferiority complex and do-or-die competition between Universities?

There are different types of ranking and each is done using different indices or a blend of metrics of excellence and quality. While there exists a number of popular universities rankings, that are either country/region specific or peculiar to a particular discipline, some have gained more prominence than others and are generally considered as authoritative. Some rankings adopt publication and citation impact. Some of the popular universities ranking include:

i. Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU);

ii. Times Higher Education World University Rankings;

iii. QS World University Rankings; and

iv. Webometrics Ranking of World Universities.

### 3.1. Webometrics Ranking of World Universities

Webometrics emphasizes visibility. The first question webometrics addresses is visibility –It asks are you visible? A lot of brilliantly written Conference papers, Doctoral thesis, Masters Dissertations, undergraduate projects, opinion papers, and position papers continue to beautifully decorate our library shelves. Yet, the crucial question remains – How many people have heard of our works (this simply means, how many people have seen us, how many are aware that such a work even exists)? As has been observed, there is a low visibility of African scholars and researchers globally.

The Webometrics ranking of world universities is a Cybermetrics Lab which carries out the practice of ranking universities. Webometrics came into limelight in 2004.The founders of this ranking system solely believed that a firm web presence provides vital information on a broad variety of factors with the propensity to correlate within the global quality of the university.[12]It was believed that the agendum of the ranking system is to convince both the political and academic communities of the very significance of web publication not only for dissemination of academic

Books, Google Scholar, and Scopus' (2019) 70 *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 140.

[10] Dembereldorj (n 7) 27.

[11] Dembereldorj (n 7) 27.

[12] A Rauhvargers, 'Global University Rankings and their Impact' <https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/global%20university%20rankings%20and%20their%20impact.pdf> accessed 28 June 2023; S Marginson, 'The Worldwide trend to high participation Higher Education: Dynamics of Social Stratification in inclusive Systems' (2016) 72 413; J Wilsdonet al, 'The Metric Tide: Report of the Independent Review of the Role of Metrics in Research Assessment and Management' <10.13140/RG.2.1.4929.1363> accessed 21 July 2023.

knowledge but for measuring scientific activities, performance and impact.[13] Webometrics is updated every six months, with data being collected early in the year, January and towards the middle of the year, July. These data are published a month after collection.[14]

Webometrics is a combination of two words, 'web' and 'metric'. Web, also referred to as World Wide Web (W3), is defined as a system of internet servers that support specially formatted documents. The documents are formatted in a language known as Hyper Text Mark-Up Language (HTML) that supports links to other documents, as well as graphics, audio, and video files. Hence, one can move from a document to another simply by clicking on hot spots.[15] On the other, the term, metric, is a standard of measurement; it relates to the art, process or science of measuring.[16]Webometrics operates by measuring the visibility, volume and the impact of university webpage with emphasis on scientific output. Against this backdrop, there are four (4) basic indicators of the webometric world university ranking, which are: visibility (external links); size of University web; rich files and scholar. These indicators will be discussed briefly.

In terms of visibility which carries 50%, the total number of unique external links received (inward links) by a site can only be confidentially obtained from Yahoo Search. A second indicator is the size of the university web, which carries 20% and deals with the number of pages recovered from Google yahoo, live search and exalead. Rich files is the third indicator which deals with the number of adobe acrobat (.pdf), adobe postscript (.ps), Microsoft word (.doc) and Microsoft PowerPoint (.ppt) files, with 15%. Finally, scholar is described as the number of papers and citations which are extracted from google scholar, having 15%.[17]

The relevance of webometrics cannot be undermined. The web itself serves as an electronic publication, with its influence reaching far larger than that obtained by traditional journals, papers and books. The web is the cheapest and most efficient way of advancing the core academic agenda of any institution, which are: teaching, research and the transfer of technology.[18] As a result, recent inclinations have led institutions of higher learning to develop and build websites or large websites.[19]

### 4.1. Benefits and Detriments of Global Universities Ranking

#### 4.1.1 Benefits of Global Universities Ranking

The benefits of universities ranking are in their numbers, and will be discussed briefly. Whereas there are challenges and limitations to the universities ranking system, yet it is fundamental to state that there are also benefits to this ranking.

Publishing has several benefits that can only be fully enjoyed by a researcher whose works have been widely read and who has a wider reach. One of the privileges open to a widely published researcher is the benefit of being a member of elite or noble professional bodies and fellowships. It affords a researcher a rare opportunity to contribute to the development of his discipline.

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[13]ibid.
[14]ibid 58.
[15]V Beal, 'Web – World Wide Web' <https://www.webopedia.com/TERM/W/World_Wide_Web.html> accessed 29 June 2023.
[16]Merriam-Webster, 'Metric' <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/metric+&cd=10&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=ng> accessed 28 July 2023.
[17]Rauhvargers (n 12)58.
[18]E O Asekun-Olarinmove, 'The Importance of Research in University's Webometric Ranking: UNIOSUN Case Study' (2015) 3 RJHS 184.
[19]*Ibid* 186.

The relationship that exists between a law teacher and his institution is a symbiotic relationship. It is one where both parties benefit mutually from each other. When a researcher publishes outstanding works, the reward and accolades in the first instance goes to him, before his university benefits from it. Such researcher's personal profile is boosted, while boosting the image and ranking of his or her university. When a university goes a rank higher on the ranking of universities, the benefits of being affiliated with an epitome of excellence also rubs off on such individual. Riding on the prestige, name and good reputation of such institution, one can attain greater heights.

More so, universities ranking provides a platform for students to make informed and intentional decisions on the choice of universities to attend. One major function of university ranking is that it influences students and parents in the choice of universities to be enrolled in or to enrol their wards. This then influences the decision to study a similar program at another university on the basis that the chosen university ranks higher. Also, when considering the choice of institution to partner with, investors can also choose to partner with institutions with higher ranking.

In addition, university ranking helps universities to monitor their works and evaluate their program. In this light, ranking encourages universities to compete with other similar or close universities in the ranking. According to Kayyali, ranking has intellectual, marketing, knowledgeable, scientific and financial importance to universities, and this necessitates universities to eagerly anticipate results and sometimes even to create divisions, units and departments to support quality and improve ranking.[20] This is very important for the competition inherent in the field of higher education institution. It is trite to note that competition among universities cut across issues such as facilities, quality of teaching staff, publication, environment and location, academic ranking, among others. These areas and more constitute the basis for university competition, and if achieved and considered, will go a long way to put the university on a high rank.

Furthermore, university ranking brings about permanent updated information and spurs an independent and autonomous reference for information. The neutrality and transparency of the results and outputs are one of the most important reasons researchers trust them. This increasing dependence of researchers on the ranking, its result and outputs has raised many important points regarding the neutrality of the results presented. Researchers observed the criteria set by a number of rankings, and analysed the inputs, and interpreted them with the outputs and results issued by the ranking authority to ensure the credibility of the information.[21]

Other benefits of university ranking will include: university ranking encourages the university to develop action plans, motivation for positive change, encourage the university to do scientific research, develop the university in specific areas, encourage university to establish partnerships with the universities of common interest, and supports decision making policy, promotes courage and encourage educational institutions to make courageous steps for the best of their students.[22]

### 4.1.2. Detriments of Global Universities Ranking

One detriment of university ranking is that it has the tendency to distract the student. As a result of constant and permanent comparison of universities of the ranking result, student, (and lecturers) may lose focus of the goal of establishing the university, which is to teach the students. This academic ranking can result in disappointment, confusion and regret for students who have the

[20]M Kayyali, 'Pros and Cons of University Rankings'<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338676024> accessed 29 June 2023.
[21]ibid.
[22] ibid.

privilege to access the performance and result of their university when compared with other institutions.

Furthermore, with university ranking, educational institutions stand the tendency to neglect the higher education institutions to the educational process and work to focus on ranking in order to obtain a high ranking.

More so, the inability of ranking to improve teaching programs in the educational institution is a detriment of the system. Simply put, the core responsibility of universities is to teach the students and of course carry out research for self and collective advancement. However, a question begging to be answered is whether it is the duty of universities ranking bodies to improve and develop educational programs? University ranking bodies in no way develop curricula, systems and mechanisms that contributes to raising and improving the level of education, support the educational process, and develop the mechanisms, method and systems of scientific research; or is this the responsibility of specialized agencies?

Also, ranking fails to take into cognizance the uniqueness of educational institutions that provide educational programs remotely. Such universities are less considered, and when considered, they are viewed as inferior to other universities and institutions that follow the traditional pattern.[23]

### 5.1. Challenges with Webometrics Ranking of World Universities

The global university ranking system has certain challenges, which constitute a limitation to the system. This section is dedicated to discussing these challenges.

First, there is a challenge of national and linguistic diversity. Although English is generally recognized as language of research publication. English is merely one of the two major languages spoken by a billion people.[24] Unfortunately, other researches and research work with non-English origins fall outside the global conversation in English, as a result of their lack of translation into English. This unfortunate ordeal is also reflected by the global urge to and actual publication in English language journals. This therefore gives English speaking countries a higher advantage, and disenfranchising non-English speaking researchers (institutional or individuals) to a great extent. This language bias, which commenced from the first world ranking, has underscored that university ranking favours universities in the English speaking countries because publications that are non-English are rarely published and cited.[25]

Secondly, the ranking process has merely become an end to itself, without critical scrutiny. The quest of universities to be ranked and ranked high seems to have overtaken the sole essence of the establishment and need for a university or higher institution. Marginson rightly captures this challenge as he opined that rankings are clearly hypnotic and have become an end themselves, with no regard to what they measure exactly, and whether they are grounded firmly or whether their utilization has any form of constructive effect.[26]

Thirdly, ranking reduces the scope for innovations in curriculum, pedagogy, strategy and research, while downplaying the goal of teaching. This point is closely knitted with the second point. What university ranking has succeeded in doing is to brand universities as reputation seeking

[23]ibid.

[24] S Marginson, 'Global University Rankings: Where to from here?' <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242561674>accessed 29 July 2023.

[25]S Marginson and M Wan der Wende, 'To Rank or to be Ranked: The Impact of Global Rankings in Higher Education' (2007) 11*Journal of Studies in International Education* 306.

[26]Marginson (n 24).

organizations. To this end, ranking motivates stakeholders to pay more attention on enhancing the reputation and performance of the university within the auspices of the indicators outlined by global ranking bodies and system, especially student selectivity and research performance.[27]

Another challenge that is associated with university ranking is that of regional bias. For instance, American scientists basically cite other Americans, while ignoring scholarship from other countries, which may, to a great extent, boost the ranking of the US universities.[28] What this does is to advance the regional course.

### 6.1. Webometrics as a Politics of Knowledge

The politics of knowledge in the global university ranking constitutes a challenge for a few continents (like Africa) and countries of the world that have opted out of the system or questioned its genuineness. Using Africa as case study, African universities find themselves at a loss in this situation as a result of their status as developing or underdeveloped countries. Nevertheless, the question that begs for an answer is whether global university ranking should be pursued in order to be internationally recognized? Or whether the pursuit of global or world class status will serve the African environment and priorities by bringing solutions to the African challenges?

A succinct glimpse at the ranking result of the years 2015-2016 reveals that five Universities in Africa which are all located in South Africa were ranked among the top five (500)universities. According to Ndofirepi, the fact that these 5 universities are in one locality, which is South Africa, where the economy of the country is far better than that of many African countries, raises the vital question on whose knowledge matters?[29] It further reveals the connection that exists among ranking, the economic prowess of a state, and finally, legitimization of knowledge hierarchies.[30] To this end, Nyamnjoh opined on the difficulties associated with Africa-based knowledge in relation to knowledge emanating from European and Northern American regions. The scholar believed that this discrepancy is a factor which can be attributed to Africa's colonial history, coupled with the fallacious thought that the region and people, lack any meaningful contribution to advance, apart from maintaining its *status quo ante* as the cradle of human kind, violence and conquest . . .[31]

These global rankings are basically created and controlled by the West, with a dominating ideology that makes African academia inferior and which has denied the latter the ability and power to grow and develop opposing knowledge systems originating in the African clime.[32]The African continent and people have a unique identity that is peculiar and tailored towards meeting its needs. The continent has been marked as a developing region with developmental challenges, realities and priorities best suited to the African man and region. In the same vein, higher institutions such as universities, and the knowledge they develop and propagate, are the heart and core of the developments and progresses of Africa and her people. Like Africa, so also it is elsewhere, that the educational system is tailored towards meeting national and continental goals and policies, while displaying such outlook. This is therefore an appeal for university singled out knowledge

[27]Marginson (n 24).
[28]P Altbach,'The Dilemmas of Ranking'[2015]International Higher Education<https://10.6017/ihe.2006.42.7878> accessed 13August 2020. See also Rauhvargers (n 12).
[29]ANdofirepi, 'African Universities on a Global Ranking Scale: Legitimation of Knowledge Hierarchies?'(2017) 31 *South African Journal of Higher Education* 155.
[30]*Ibid*.
[31]FB Nyamnjoh, 'Incompleteness: Frontier Africa and the Currency of Conviviality' (2015) 52 *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 1.
[32]Ndofirepi (n 29) 167.

processes to focus on serving the wellbeing and peculiarities of the climes where the institution is situated.[33]

Due to this lack of uniformity and universality, adjudging universities from diverse socio-economic settings and orientation on a league table as though they are all uniformed and homogenous is an '*intelligent mistake'*, and disregard for the socio-economic goals, agenda, needs, uniqueness, capacities and strength across countries and continents.[34] It is therefore expedient to note that while rivalry has constantly been apparent in academia and has the capacity to aid the production of excellence, it can facilitate downwardness in the academia . . .[35]

Universities ranking, in this case webometrics, is but a reflection of the divide between the North and South, while showcasing the North as superior and the South inferior. In the same vein, this ranking is only an agendum that covers and encloses the common, that is, the colonization of knowledge system regarding them as inferior.

### 7.1. Conclusion

Global ranking of universities is a process and system which generates a huge amount of pressure in the higher institution or university environment. Unfortunately, universities that are unable to meet up with these ranking are incapacitated and marginalized. Fortunately, there are merits that universities ranking bring to limelight.

University ranking has its benefits and at the same time its demerits. Nonetheless, the concept and practice of rating universities across the world on certain indicators favourable to or tailored to be favourable to a particular region or language is one of such grounds upon which the practice has been fought. In the same light, the ranking system fails to take notice of the differences that are inherent and apparent in different socio-economic climes. On this basis, why rank universities? Ranking which has been likened to capitalism has become an agendum of a selected few to deprive and water down the peculiarity of a region or nation. It is for these reasons that the African continent and people are averse to the practice. Ranking has therefore been made as the basis for being a world class university or global university, giving more attention to reputation and fame rather than focus on the primary goal for the establishment of higher institutions, to teach the students.

Finally, as Nyamnjoh puts it, Africans and the proceeds of their creative imagination, the knowledge they display or relay, should assume diverse arrangements and evidence themselves in a variety of ways according to necessity and context as a means of self-liberation and identification.[36]

### 8.1. Recommendation

While the axiom 'publish or perish is consistently repeated, it is important that factors that could aid proper publishing are emphasised. Thus, it is pertinent that faculty make efforts to polish their research and writing skills. Just like litigation which is both a science and an art, so also is legal research and writing. Furthermore, recent trends in academic writing and publishing show that inter-disciplinary research and empiricism in legal research is gaining wider acceptance. No legal

[33]Ndofirepi (n 29) 168.
[34]Nyamnjoh (n 31).
[35]PG Altbach, L Reisberg and LE Rumbley, *Trends in Global Higher Education: Tracking an Academic Revolution* (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2009).
[36]Nyamnjoh (n 31).

scholar can afford to be left behind, this therefore creates imperatives on faculty to seek and engage in wider collaborations with other fields of study and a change reconsideration of methodology.

In the same vein, researchers should be intentional when publishing articles or sending out papers for publication. To this end, publishers should endeavour that their papers are published online. This will advance the ranking of the institution concerned. In line with this, researchers should endeavour to write quality papers. Therefore, Nigerian scholars should delve more into writing quality papers that would meet international standards, not for competition, but at least to help develop the Nigerian frontier.

Furthermore, there is need to develop a National and Regional database that addresses the problems peculiar to Africa and Nigeria, while proffering solutions that are suitable to our local environmental needs. This is fundamental because a regional and country based ranking system will take cognizance of the many unique qualities eminent in the region.