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## **EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF STATE HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY REFORMS IN UKRAINE UNDER SOCIOCULTURAL CHALLENGES: INTERNATIONAL RANKINGS AS DIAGNOSTIC TOOLS**

*The role of international university rankings as diagnostic tools for assessing the effectiveness of state policy in higher education reform under conditions of global sociocultural challenges is analyzed. The dynamics of European and Asian universities' representation in leading international rankings (QS, THE, ARWU, CWTS) is examined, revealing significant shifts in global higher education competitiveness. Methodological approaches of ranking agencies to comprehensive assessment of university activities are systematically analyzed, including research quality, educational environment, international cooperation, and institutional reputation. It is demonstrated that despite Bologna reforms and significant investments in quality improvement, European universities are systematically losing positions in global rankings, while Asian universities demonstrate rapid progress. For Ukraine's higher education system, international rankings serve as objective indicators of reform effectiveness and strategic development guidelines. It is substantiated that ranking diagnostic approaches provide possibilities for policy correction and strategic planning in higher education management under conditions of complex sociocultural transformations.*

**Keywords:** *international rankings, higher education policy, Bologna Process, educa-*

*tional reforms, quality assessment, global competitiveness, sociocultural challenges, public administration mechanisms, university effectiveness, diagnostic tools.*

**Problem Statement.** Global sociocultural transformations of the 21st century fundamentally change the higher education landscape, creating new challenges for national systems and public administration mechanisms in the educational sphere. Digitalization, talent migration, changing paradigms of scientific cognition and innovation activity form a new competitive environment where traditional approaches to assessing educational systems' quality and effectiveness prove insufficient. In this context, international university rankings acquire particular significance as tools for objective diagnosis of state higher education reform policy effectiveness.

The research relevance is determined by a paradoxical situation in the global educational space: despite large-scale Bologna reforms aimed at improving European higher education quality and its competitiveness, European universities systematically lose positions in leading international rankings. Meanwhile, Asian universities demonstrate rapid growth in presence and position improvement in global rankings, indicating the effectiveness of alternative approaches to higher education development. For Ukraine, which is actively integrating into the European educational space, this trend has critical significance for forming strategic educational policy guidelines.

The problem situation lies in the necessity of rethinking traditional approaches to assessing state higher education policy effectiveness under conditions of dynamic sociocultural changes. Classical education quality indicators, oriented toward quantitative coverage and funding indicators, prove insufficient for adequate assessment of national educational systems' competitiveness in the global context. International rankings, despite criticism of their methodology, remain the only systematic tools for comparative assessment of university effectiveness, making them indispensable for diagnosing state reform effectiveness.

**Analysis of Recent Domestic and Foreign Research.** The theoretical foundations for using international rankings as tools for assessing educational policy effectiveness are examined in the context of new public management theory and evidence-based policy

concepts. The Bologna Declaration establishes understanding of higher education quality as a comprehensive characteristic including correspondence of results to current needs of individuals, the state, and society [2].

The methodology of leading ranking systems is based on multi-criteria approaches to assessing university effectiveness. The Shanghai Ranking (ARWU) focuses on research excellence, using objective indicators of scientific achievements and academic productivity [1]. The QS ranking combines academic reputation with employer assessment and scientometric indicators, ensuring balance between research and educational functions of universities [7; 8]. Times Higher Education applies the most comprehensive approach, integrating multiple indicators in several groups: research, education, and international activity [10].

The CWTS Leiden Ranking presents an alternative methodology of multifactorial assessment without indicator aggregation, ensuring transparency and allowing individual ranking by specific criteria [3]. This methodology is particularly valuable for national systems developing their own higher education development priorities. Critical analysis of literature reveals insufficient attention to systematic study of rankings as public administration tools. Most research focuses on technical aspects of ranking methodologies, while the management potential of ranking information for forming and correcting educational policy remains insufficiently explored. This particularly concerns analysis of dynamic trends in global rankings and their implications for national higher education development strategies. Recent research by Hladchenko [4] demonstrates that for Ukrainian universities participating in QS Rankings, there exists a tendency for means to become ends, highlighting the need for more strategic approaches to using ranking diagnostics in educational policy.

The purpose of the article is theoretical substantiation and practical demonstration of using international university rankings as a diagnostic tool for assessing the effectiveness of state higher education reform policy under conditions of global sociocultural challenges. The research is aimed at developing conceptual foundations of ranking diagnostics as a component of the higher education quality management system at the national level.

Presentation of Main Research Material with Full Justification of Obtained Scientific Results. The concept of ranking diagnostics for state higher education policy effectiveness

relies on the idea of external feedback, when national reform results are assessed not only by internal indicators but also through comparison with universities of other countries. In this approach, international university rankings are considered as independent expertise tools that translate rather abstract policy goals (quality, competitiveness, international attractiveness) into a system of measurable indicators [1; 7; 8]. A key feature of leading world rankings is different emphases in measuring university effectiveness. The Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) represents a classic example of a “strictly objectivist” approach: indicators are entirely based on scientometric data and information about scientific awards. The focus is on the number of alumni and staff who are Nobel Prize and Fields Medal laureates, the number of highly cited researchers, publications in Nature and Science journals, as well as indexed articles in leading databases. Corresponding indicators are reduced to an integral assessment with predominance of the “scientific” component [1; 8]. This creates an obvious advantage for research universities and simultaneously limits the possibility of using ARWU as a diagnostic tool for systems where significant emphasis is placed on educational or regional mission.

QS World University Rankings, conversely, combines objective indicators with large arrays of reputation surveys. Academic reputation and employer assessment collectively form half of the final score, complemented by faculty-to-student ratio, publication citations, and internationalization indicators (proportion of international students and faculty) [7; 8]. Such design is closer to the management logic of state policy, as it simultaneously captures research quality, learning conditions, graduate employability, and international attractiveness. The methodology of Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE) further expands the assessment framework. The WUR 3.0 system uses 18 indicators grouped into five blocks: teaching, research environment, research quality, international dimension, and industry interaction [10]. Thanks to this, THE enables analysis of which specific component of university activity is strengthened or, conversely, weakened by state reforms (research funding, personnel policy, international partnerships, third mission development).

The CWTS Leiden Ranking fundamentally differs from ARWU, QS, and THE in that it refuses a single integral score. It provides a set of scientometric indicators (share of publications in the top 1/5/10% most cited, intensity of international cooperation, etc.),

leaving users the right to independently determine weights [3]. For state policy, this is important: the government or national agencies can build “their own” ranking data sections for specific priorities—for example, separately for STEM fields, social sciences, or regional universities. Comparative analysis of position dynamics of universities from different regions in international rankings over the past two decades demonstrates a profound change in the global balance of power in higher education. ARWU and QS data indicate a gradual decline in the share of European universities in upper segments of ranking tables and simultaneous growth in representation of Asian institutions, primarily China, Singapore, South Korea, and Hong Kong [1; 7]. In the case of QS, this is expressed not only in increasing numbers of Asian universities in the top 200 but also in strengthening their positions in scientometric indicators and employer reputation [7; 8].

The European trajectory appears more contradictory. On one hand, the Bologna Process and related legislative reforms formally ensured unification of structural parameters of higher education systems, development of internal quality assurance systems, and increased transparency of educational programs [2; 8]. On the other hand, global ranking statistics demonstrate that institutional quality and international competitiveness do not automatically grow as a result of formal implementation of European frameworks. The decline or stagnation of ranking positions of many European universities is combined with an active “breakthrough” of Asian institutions, where reforms are built around clearly structured financial priorities, investments in research infrastructure, targeted talent attraction programs, and internationalization [1; 5; 6]. In this context, Ukraine represents an indicative case of a state simultaneously experiencing structural modernization of the higher education system and extreme external challenges related to war. According to QS World University Rankings 2025, the ranking includes 11 Ukrainian universities, as in the previous edition; meanwhile, most of them either maintain or worsen their positions in the global table [4; 7]. National rankings, particularly “Top 200 Ukraine 2025,” demonstrate another side of the picture: universities with strong internal quality assurance systems and better NAQA accreditation results are generally more stably present in international rankings. This provides grounds to consider national accreditation results as an “internal” indicator of potential for improving international positions.

Martial law radically complicates this picture. Infrastructure destruction, forced relocation of higher education institutions, migration of academic staff and students, redistribution of financial resources in favor of the security and defense sector objectively worsen universities' capabilities to increase research indicators, which are key for ARWU and THE, as well as maintain a high level of internationalization. As a result, rankings record not only the quality of management decisions in education but also the impact of external shocks that go beyond the competence of relevant authorities. Despite this, international rankings remain an important source of information for state educational policy. First, they allow tracking how the "portrait" of a country's higher education system changes in the global context—what types of universities appear in rankings, how their strengths and weaknesses transform, which indicators "sag" most under crisis influence. Second, ranking data can be integrated into national funding mechanisms, differentiating support depending on position dynamics in authoritative international tables [1; 5; 6].

A separate dimension of ranking diagnostics is related to the emergence of new types of global assessments oriented toward Sustainable Development Goals. THE Impact Rankings measures universities' contribution to achieving UN Sustainable Development Goals, while QS World University Rankings: Sustainability assesses environmental, social, and governance sustainability of institutions [9]. For Ukraine under war conditions, these rankings acquire dual significance. On one hand, they record universities' capacity to maintain social function, work with vulnerable groups, build partnerships for regional recovery and development. On the other hand, they create additional opportunities for positioning universities in the global space not only as scientific centers but also as key actors of social resilience.

OECD theoretical generalizations regarding trends in education confirm: under modern conditions, state policy cannot be limited only to controlling basic parameters of access to higher education. Issues of research quality, graduate readiness for a changing labor market, universities' digital readiness, and their ability to respond to social inequalities are gaining increasing importance [5; 6]. International rankings, despite all methodological limitations, provide a concentrated dimension of precisely these characteristics and thereby open the possibility for result-oriented correction of state policy in higher education. Summarizing, rankings can be used as an element of the public management cycle: goal setting – policy

implementation – external diagnostics (through international rankings) – tool correction. For Ukraine, which simultaneously implements European standards and functions under war conditions, such a model offers a chance to combine national priorities (system preservation, resilience support) with long-term orientation toward global competitiveness of universities.

Conclusions. The conducted analysis confirms the central role of international university rankings as a diagnostic tool for assessing the effectiveness of state higher education reform policy under conditions of global sociocultural challenges. Ranking systems provide comprehensive, comparative, and objective assessment of university effectiveness through integration of multiple indicators of research excellence, education quality, international cooperation, and social impact.

The revealed paradoxical tendency of systematic deterioration of European universities' positions in global rankings, despite Bologna reforms and significant investments in education quality improvement, indicates the necessity of fundamental rethinking of traditional educational policy approaches. The rapid progress of Asian universities demonstrates the effectiveness of alternative higher education development models oriented toward research excellence, innovativeness, and international competitiveness. The methodological diversity of leading ranking systems enables multidimensional diagnostics of university effectiveness, considering specific national priorities and institutional features. Combining objective scientometric indicators with reputation assessments and social impact indicators ensures comprehensive understanding of institutional effectiveness [1; 3; 7; 8; 10].

For Ukraine, ranking diagnostics performs the function of a strategic guideline in the process of European integration and modernization of the national higher education system. The presence of Ukrainian universities in international rankings confirms the potential of the national educational system but simultaneously reveals critical areas for improvement: strengthening research activity, developing international cooperation, improving educational process quality, and ensuring compliance with global standards [4; 5; 6]. Global sociocultural challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, military conflicts, and climate change, transform the paradigm of university effectiveness, integrating new dimensions of sustainable development, social responsibility, and adaptability to extreme conditions. These trends are reflected in the evolution of ranking methodologies and form new criteria for diagnosing

educational policy effectiveness [9].

The strategic perspective of using ranking diagnostics involves developing an integrated system for monitoring and evaluating higher education quality that combines international standards with national specificity. Such a system must ensure continuous feedback for educational policy correction and strategic planning of higher education development under conditions of dynamic global transformations [5; 6].

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