International rankings and the reproduction of inequality in higher education

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***Abstract*—Digitalization is reshaping global ranking systems for universities which influences their evaluation governance and equity. However this transformation is not only technological it is also linked to deeper structural historical and institutional dynamics that influence equity and visibility in global higher education. This study offers a review of literature based on a discourse analysis of international ranking frame-works, like particularly QS, Times Higher Education, and Webometrics. It examines how digital indicators, algorithmic processes and standardized evaluation models interact with structural disparities between institutions in the global North and South. The research offers original contributions by identifying new forms of digital paternalism in ranking mechanisms and proposing a policy shift toward multidimensional and participatory evaluation models. These results have implications for considering equity, transparency, and institutional agency in the governance of the global systems of higher education.**

***Index Terms*—digital inequality, Higher education governance, university rankings**

I. Introduction

Globalization and digitalization process, as well as the growing application of information technologies have changed the environment of higher education institutions (HEIs). Today HEIs what want to be competitive at the local and international levels need to establish a strong online presence [1]. Thus, teaching methods, students' attraction strategies and the roles of faculty members are being significantly refined [2]. This digital transformation of higher education has widely changed how universities are evaluated. The traditional methods based mainly on expert judgments and standard indicators are progressively replaced by more complex algorithmic rankings, where automated systems can process very large amounts of data in real time and combine different types of information such as web visibility, citation impact, user feedback and algorithmic scores in order to produce hierarchical classifications [3]. These systems have become very influential since they affect reputation, international visibility and even access to partnerships and funding opportunities [4]. But this evolution also raises many questions about transparency, possible bias and the strong focus on quantitative indicators while important qualitative aspects such as teaching quality, social engagement or local missions remain more difficult to capture [5]. Based on a broad review of the literature and on the growing debate in academic and policy articles this paper seeks to better understand the impact of digitalization on university ranking systems and to analyze how digital metrics influence institutional evaluation and governance. More precisely the objectives are : First to examine whether digital rankings reinforce existing inequalities between well resourced and less advantaged institutions, and second, to analyze the extent to which digitalization encourages institutional isomorphism and contributes to the standardization of higher education systems across different national and regional context.

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II. Background

in order to improve their position in rankings many HEIs have started to adopt the same digital strategies and tools, which means that instead of encouraging diversity in missions and profiles their practices slowly become more similar over time period this tendency has become stronger with the spread of standardized digital infrastructures, learning management systems and data-driven performance indicators that are often promoted as universal solutions. This situation can be understood through the idea of institutional isomorphism developed by DiMaggio and Powell [6]. Which suggests that organizations in the same field tend to resemble each other because of different kinds of pressures. These include coercive pressures coming from regulations and accreditation bodies memetic pressures where institutions imitate those that are considered more successful, and normative pressures linked to professional and industry norms. In the context of higher education this framework helps to explain why universities respond to competition, ranking expectations and quality assurance Requirements by aligning their digital strategies with dominant models, which in the long term reinforces standardization and reduces institutional diversity.

A. Coercive isomorphism: regulatory and market pressures

Coercive isomorphism in higher education happens when universities are influenced by formal and informal pressures coming from government policies, accreditation agencies and

funding organizations [6]. Universities conform to national or regional policies regarding digital education by adopting standardized online learning platforms, student management systems, and digital quality control mechanisms [7]. In Spain entry into The European higher education area (EHEA) necessitated widespread adoption of digital infrastructures to satisfy standardized assessments practices and accreditations. In Greece as well, universities adopted ISO based quality management systems as a response to regulative pressures and consolidated structural convergence among institutions [8].

B. Normative isomorphism: convergence standards and professional

Normative isomorphism in higher education is influenced by best practices across industries and scholarly associations and professional networks that influence digital strategy in HEIs [9]. With digital education becoming increasingly central to academic missions, funders and professional associations encourage standardized digital pedagogies and technological platforms. This is evident in convergence of digital entrepreneurship Education in Malaysian polytechnics with formal interview protocols to ensure consistency across institutions [10]. In a similar way, international accreditation has influenced business schools to standardize digital offerings to international standards with emphasis on uniformity rather than innovation [11]. In light of the standardization of digital strategy by universities to advance global reputation, there are concerns regarding power relations in data-led governance [12]. Institutional homogenization is reinforced by digital infrastructure and ranking mechanisms [13] and spreads to data colonialism by which powerful institutions control knowledge creation and dissemination [14] [15].

C. Data colonialism and algorithmic governance

Couldry and Mejias [16] Refer to data colonialism as a form of control through gathering and algorithmic judgment. Universities that depend more and more on digital platforms and ranking mechanisms become part of global hierarchies that tend to favor institutions that already have more financial technological and human resources while those with limited digital infrastructures or weaker international visibility remain at the margins. This situation contributes to reinforcing epistemic inequalities especially for universities that are outside dominant technological and linguistic spaces, where access to data visibility and network is more restricted. The higher education market is therefore closely linked to broader dynamics of data colonialism and algorithmic governance, since institutions are increasingly competing for rankings, funding and reputation within systems that are shaped by global data flows and digital power relations, which can further deepen existing asymmetries between regions and institutions [17]. With institutions competed for reckons finance their reputation [18] they adopt corporate practices that put financialization and branding before academic excellence [19]. Neoliberalism has transformed higher education into a market sector that has reconfigured institution priorities and forms of governance [20].

D. Marketization and neoliberalism in higher education

Research shows that neoliberal reforms have altered how universities operate so that today many of them act more like competitive organizations, with a strong focus on branding, income generation and research outputs instead of giving the same attention to the real quality of education and student learning [21]. Rankings play an important role in this evolution because they push institutions to seek prestige, visibility and financial success sometimes at the expense of broader academic and social missions [21]. This has been accompanied by rising tuition fees in many countries, a stronger orientation of research toward market interests, and the growing use of corporate style communications to attract international students and strategique partners [22] [23]. This market driven logic also affects professors and students in everyday life, and gradually transforms universities into organizations that look more like companies than public institutions [24]. Education is treated as a product that can be sold and promoted and this tends to reinforce inequalities. Universities that already have strong resources can invest more in marketing, infrastructure and global networks, while others struggle to keep up and remain less visible in the international academic space.

E. Quantification, commensuration and the illusion of objectivity

One of the main findings is that the increasing importance of university rankings is closely linked to the increasing use of quantitative indicators in the evaluation of higher education [25]. In many governance systems today numbers are often seen as neutral, objective and reliable, so they create an impression of fairness and scientific precision [26]. The central takeaway is that rankings simplify complex academic realities, transforming institutional performance into scores and positions, which creates a strong feeling of transparency and compatibility even if the reality is much more complicated [27]. However, several researchers have shown that this process is not really natural and that quantification is a social construction, shaped by specific values, priorities and power relations in higher education [28] [29]. Quantification refers to the transformation of qualitative and multidimensional aspects of universities into measurable indicators [30] [31] [32]. In rankings this includes citation impact, number of publications, research income, with visibility or reputation surveys [33]. These indicators allow comparisons between institutions and countries, but at the same time they also shape what is considered as academic excellence [34]. The choice of indicators and their weights is never completely objective, it is based on normative assumptions, since it reflects assumptions about what should be valued in higher education. As a result rankings do not only measure quality they also participate in defining and constructing it [35]. The idea of commensuration helps to understand this process better. Scholars such as Wendy Nelson Epsland and Mitchell L. Stevens [36] explained that

commensuration means comparing different entities using a common metric. This requires reducing diversity and complexity into standardized categories that allow comparison [37]. Universities that have different missions resources and social rules are evaluated using the same criteria, focusing on research productivity and international visibility. This tends to favor institutions that follow dominant global models, while those that focus more on teaching, regional developments or social inclusion become less visible in ranking systems [38]. One important consequence of this process is the simplification of institutional diversity [39]. Many contributions such as community engagement local impact or social responsibility are difficult to measure and are therefore not well represented in rankings which reinforce A narrow vision of excellence based on mainly measurable outputs [40]. At the same time the strong reliance on numbers creates what some authors call an illusion of objectivity, because numerical results look neutral and scientific but they hide the value choices and power relations that exist behind methodologies [41].

III. DIGITALISATION AND INEQUALITY IN UNIVERSITY RANKINGS

A. Digital inequality

Robinson stated that "Digital inequality deserves a place alongside more traditional forms of inequality in the 21st century pantheon of inequalities" [42] One of the core arguments presented by scholars is that the growing use of web-based data collection to study large, broadly defined populations highlights the critical role of digital exclusion in research across disciplines, including higher education rankings [43]. The reliance on digital metrics as a primary source of information is subject to inherent biases because institutions and individuals with restricted access or visibility on digital platforms are systematically undercounted [44]. Thus, studies based on such methods can contribute to entrenching inequalities by excluding digitally marginalized communities and yielding results that are biased and not generalizable [45]. Digital inequalities reinforce and mirror existing social hierarchies and expand the racial and economic disparities between global north and global South. Africa with a population of 14% has only 3% Internet users [46], exemplifying how economic inequalities drive digital exclusion. Poor access to digital resources denies job and educational opportunities and reinforces systemic inequalities [42]. Elite universities that already have strong digital infrastructure and have very large online visibility usually appear higher in global rankings like Webometrics and Scimago institutions rankings, because these rankings give a lot of importance to web presence, citations and different digital indicators [47]. On the other side many disadvantaged institutions do not have enough financial or technical resources to improve their digital image so they remain less visible and this reduces their chances to attract funding, good researchers or international collaborations. This creates a vicious cycle where the same institutions continue to stay at the top while others find it very difficult to catch up, which increases the gap in academic opportunities and global influence [42]. It is particularly clear in higher education rankings, that those with robust digital infrastructures appearing higher and those with weak online presence appear lower or are sometimes even misrepresented in the data. In the end the evaluation of institutional performance becomes incomplete and sometimes biased, since digital visibility does not always reflect the real quality of education or the local and social missions of universities, but it still plays a very important role in how they are judged at the international level.

B. Bias of digital ranking systems

As showcased by Gavroglu "quantification has forcefully reintroduced a notion of objectivity cleansed of its subtle and intricate theoretical problems" [5] The idea that technology is natural and that it is merely a question of how it is used is questionable: values, strategy, and social dynamics shape and constitute technology and are embedded in it. They restructure social relations in turn [5]. In this context, several experts reckon that web-based university is having limitations since it distorts the perception of quality in academics by linking web process with excellence in institutions and reinforcing narrow and biased evaluation [48] [49]. Digital record systems to reduce your diversity assessment to online indicators without considering important academic qualities. By concentrating all digital factors like citation rates, journal impact factors, and Nobel prizes [50], its misses important areas like impact on studies, quality of education, contributions to society, and community engagement. Therefore, those institutions that excel in these non virtual areas particularly those that concentrates on local developments, social progress, and accessible education are downgraded. Even those with significant contributions to studies and community engagements with limited digital resources are ranked lower even though they have a tangible impact [43].

C. Digital paternalism and limited institutional agency

Historically, ranking agencies have been insistent on having HEIs remain separate and distinct from those processes that condition their evaluation and treating them as positive objects and not active agents in shaping ranking methodology. This has been characterized as digital paternalism [51], positioning epistemic power in ranking organization and limiting institutional agency in shaping what is used to judge them. Although recent ranking systems such as U-Multirank have introduced participatory data collection [48], this is still superficial because institutions can share their data, but they do not have real control over the system that decide how ranking are made [18]. As a result, higher education institutions are judged by outside systems that favor numbers and rankings over broader educational values [51] [52]. This limited role also means universities cannot truly challenge the assumption behind rankings. Instead, it strengthens our competitive, market driven view of education one that is focused on online visibility and comparing scores rather than supporting diverse missions or serving the public good [54] [55].

D. Structural and global inequality

While digital inequality helps to explain why some universities are more visible than others, ranking results are also influenced by deeper structural and territorial factors that are not always taken into account [56]. Universities do not compete in the same conditions, they have different resources, histories and regional contexts, but global rankings still use standardized indicators and apply the same criteria to everyone. Because of this institutional performance is often interpreted without really considering the broader economic social and political environments in which universities operate, which can lead to partial or even misleading conclusions about their real contributions and missions [57]. Higher education institutions are part of national and regional systems that are very different from one country to another, especially when it comes to funding, research priorities and the level of institutional support [58] [59]. Public investment in research and higher education can vary a lot, which directly affects the availability of laboratories, doctoral programs and research infrastructures [60] [61]. Universities that are located in regions with strong industrial ecosystems, innovation clusters and knowledge based economies usually have more favorable conditions to develop research and collaboration, because they can rely on close links with companies, technology parks and dynamic regional networks [62], These territorial and socioeconomic advantages are very visible in bibliometric rankings where proximity to research partners and industry collaborations often leads to higher publication outputs and various citation results. Hence, institutions in these environments tend to perform better, even if this does not always reflect their internal quality [63] [56]. Historical trajectories also matter a lot because countries that invested early in higher education and research still dominates most global rankings today. This kind of path dependency means that past investments continue to shape current visibility and reputation even if the present economic situation has changed [64] [65] [66]. In this context rankings often reflect accumulated academic capital built over many years, rather than focus on recent progress or improvement inside institutions, which makes it much harder for universities with less resource systems to move up and gain recognition [66]. Another structural problem is the narrow focus of many ranking indicators since most global rankings give priority to research productivity over reputation and international visibility while they pay much less attention to the real missions of institutions and their resource limitation or their social responsibilities [67] [68]. This tends to favor universities that are already well integrated in global research systems and disadvantages those that work more on teaching local development or social inclusion [69] [56]. In the end rankings can reinforce one dominant model of excellence based mainly on research intensity and global competition even if higher education systems are much more diverse and respond to different needs depending on their context [29]. All these structural dynamics also lead to a strong concentration of prestige and resources in higher education. Ranking positions influence access to funding partnerships and also student demand, So institutions that are already dominant continue to attract more opportunities and strengthen their position over time [18] [70]. This creates cumulative effects where disadvantages become more and more difficult to challenge. Elite universities are usually less affected by small changes in rankings because their reputation is already established, while lower ranked institutions can face stronger financial and image consequences when their position decreases [70]. At the same time by using the same criteria for different contexts rankings can present these inequalities as if they were simply objective differences in performance. In reality this hides the structural conditions in which universities operate and can legitimise existing disparities [71]. This situation raises important questions about fairness, comparability and the real meaning of global rankings, and it shows the need to take into account contextual and structural factors when evaluating higher education systems [72].

E. Hidden mechanisms of market inequality

Beyond these structural disparities diverse scholars also highlight that global rankings are influenced by hidden mechanisms that help to reproduce inequalities over time [73] [68] [70] [74]. These mechanisms are not always visible, they are embedded in everyday academic practices, evaluation norms and also in the way knowledge is produced and circulated. Even if they work in an indirectly, they still have a strong effect on institutional visibility and recognition at the global level [75] [76] [77]. One important mechanism is language. Many studies show that English has become the dominant language of scientific communication especially in high impact journals and in the many international databases. This means that researchers and universities that publish in other languages often have less visibility even if their work is relevant in their own context. It also creates traditional barriers for scholars who need more time and resources to publish in English [78] [79]. A second mechanism is related to academic networks and collaboration structures. Global research today is organized around dense and well established networks often centered in North America and Western Europe [78] [79], which makes it easier for these institutions to access funding, co-authorship and prestigious publication outlets. Universities that are less connected to these networks face more difficulties to gain recognition even when their research is innovative or socially important [80]. as a result ranking outcomes do not only reflect performance but also the structure of global academic relations [81] this unequal distribution of visibility can also be seen in the geographical concentration of top ranked universities, which is illustrated in Figure 1.

Another important dimension concerns the hierarchy of knowledge and research agendas. Empirical studies show that dominant academic communities often defined evaluation standards and decide what is considered legitimate or impactful research [82] [83]. as a result topics linked to local development, regional challenges or applied knowledge can receive less attention in global citation systems, even if they are very im-

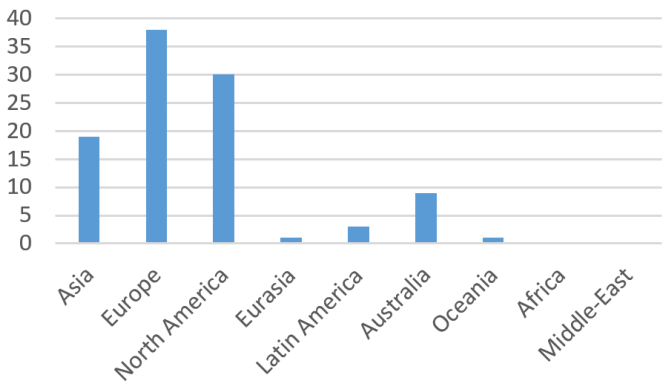

Fig. 1. Regional distribution of leading universities in QS ranking, highlighting the geographical concentration of academic prestige in Europe and North America

portant in their own contexts [84] [86] [85]. This situation can marginalize certain types of knowledge and create epistemic imbalances between regions and institutions [88] [87]. Another important point is the internal distribution of resources inside universities many institutions today adopt strategic behaviors to improve their ranking position, so they concentrate funding and support in disciplines and activities that produce measurable outputs such as publications or citations [38] [89]. This can increase inequalities between fields, because some disciplines become more valuated while others receive less attention, it also pushes universities to prioritize research areas that bring international visibility instead of those that respond to local or social needs [90] [91]. Overtime these strategies can lead to a standardization of institutional priorities and reduce the diversity of missions in higher education [92] [90] [91].

IV. DISCUSSION

Drawing on the research questions identified above, this debate discusses how digitalization interacts with broader structural and global dynamics to shape University Rankings, deepens the academic inequalities, shapes institutional priorities, and drives higher education marketization.

A. overreliance on digital metrics

Ranking criteria are based on online visibility, citation counts, and algorithm scores and do not consider broader scholarly contributions [93]. Excellence is identified with digital performance and disregards either factors such as pedagogy equality, community engagement and interdisciplinarity [94]. Non digital areas of excellence for higher education institutions such as regional developments and social engagement are penalized and generate A distorted perception of educational quality [48] [95].

B. Algorithmic governance and marketization

Algorithmic rankings have also contributed to turning higher education into a kind of competitive market where financial investment plays a central role in institutional success [96]. Universities use their resources to invest in activities that can improve their ranking position, such as digital expansion, hiring highly cited researchers or developing partnerships and visibility strategies linked to ranking systems [52]. These trends are often aligned with neoliberal policy orientations that focus more on branding, reputation and financial optimization than on real pedagogical improvement or long term research development [97]. This situation also benefits institutions that operate mainly in English, because they already have advantages in publication, visibility and international networks. As a result western academic dominance tends to be reinforced while other platforms of knowledge and non western epistemologies remain less visible or less recognized in global evaluation systems [98].

C. Institutional autonomy and digital paternalism

Ranking agencies exert a system of digital paternalism [51], in which institutions merely conform to external criteria for evaluation. While platforms like U-multirank offer participatory functionalities [51], institutions remain subject to opaque methodologies that limit them to define accomplishment on their own terms. This system entrenches a top-down structure in which top institutions set academic prestige and others fight for visibility. All these dynamics show that the limits of global ranking systems are not only technical or methodological but also deeply structural. for this reason addressing these issues requires A broader reflection on the design and governance of rankings, with the objective of developing more equitable and context sensitive approaches that recognize diversity between higher education systems and support equitable forms of evaluation.

V. TOWARD MORE EQUITABLE AND INCLUSIVE RANKING SYSTEMS

The analysis developed in this paper suggests that the inequalities in global ranking systems are not only related to technical or methodological issues, but also to deeper structural dynamics. In this sense, improving indicators or adding new metrics is unlikely to solve the main imbalances in visibility recognition and access to resources [99]. It also means that the debate should not focus solely on how rankings are calculated, but also on how they are designed, used and governed at the global level [100] [101], in other words, the problem is broader and more political than it often appears. One possible direction is the development of more multidimensional approaches to evaluation. Universities perform a wide range of functions that cannot be reduced to research output or international visibility. Teaching quality, student success, community engagement, regional development and social inclusion are central to higher education, yet they remain marginal in most global rankings. This situation shows the need to better recognize the diversity of institutional missions then to move toward evaluation models that reflect this complexity [102] [25]. Several recent initiatives are trying to move in this direction. For example U-Multirank evaluates universities across different dimensions such as teaching and learning,

knowledge transfer, international orientation and regional engagement which allows a more diversified view of institutional performance [103]. Similarly, the Times Higher Education impact rankings focus on the contribution of universities to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and give more importance to social and environmental impact [104]. These models show that it is possible to capture broader institutional contributions and to go beyond a narrow focus on research output. However, in practice, they remain complementary rather than transformative, since traditional research based rankings continue to dominate global perceptions of excellence and influence measured decisions made by students, governments and institutions Another important issue concerns sensitivity to context. Universities do not operate under the same conditions, and their performance is strongly shaped by economic, cultural and institutional environments. When rankings compare institutions directly without considering these differences the results may be misleading or even unfair [105] [71]. In recent years, some national and regional initiatives have tried to address this challenge. For instance, the CHE university Rankin in Germany focuses more on discipline level comparisons and allows users to select indicators that matter to them, making the evaluation more flexible and less standardized [106]. In China, subject rankings developed by Shanghai Ranking attempt to reflect disciplinary diversity instead of relying only on overall institutional scores [107] These types of approaches can reduce pressure on universities to conform to a particular model and support more differentiated and more realistic ways of evaluation that better reflect the diversity of higher education systems and missions. The governance of ranking systems is also an important issue that deserves attention; many current models are mainly designed by private organizations or international actors, universities or public authorities are not always really involved in these processes. This situation can raise legitimacy concerns and mistrust, since institutions may fear that the criteria and methodologies do not reflect their realities or priorities [108]. If academic communities students policymakers and other stakeholders are more involved in defining the indicators and choosing the methodologies evaluation could become more transparent and also more accepted by institutions. Some participatory approaches already exist, like in U-multirank and in certain national quality assurance systems, where consultation with different actors is a part of the process, and indicators are developed in a more collaborative and collective way. Transparency and accountability represent a very important challenge. The growing use of complex and data-driven methods has made many ranking methodologies more difficult to understand, and this often creates confusion and sometimes mistrust among universities and policymakers [109]. Some ranking organizations have made efforts to explain their methods in a clearer way and to give more information about their indicators and how the scores are calculated [110], like the Times Higher Education and QS World University rankings, which now publish detailed descriptions of their indicators and weighting schemes, which is a step forward compared to earlier periods. However, important aspects remain opaque, especially reputation surveys, respondent selection and data validation. Many researchers stress that strengthening open data practices and introducing independent audits could therefore enhance credibility and responsibility in ranking system [111]. Finally there is a growing recognition [112] [113] [114] that quantitative metrics alone cannot capture the full complexity of academic work and university missions. Many essential dimensions such as teaching quality, social impact or community engagement are difficult to measure with numbers. For this reason hybrid approaches that combine quantitative indicators with qualitative evaluation are gaining more attention, as they allow a more nuanced and contextualized understanding of institutional performance and contributions

VI. Conclusion

Beyond digitalization, ranking systems also seem to reinforce deeper structural and historical inequalities in global higher education. Academic resources, reputation and research capacity are still concentrated in a relatively small number of countries and institutions, and this reality shapes who becomes visible and recognized at the international level. In practice, universities do not start from the same position. Some already benefit from strong infrastructures, long academic traditions and global networks while others, especially in emerging or less resource systems, must operate under very different constraints. Because of this, ranking do not only reflect differences in performance. They also contribute, sometimes unintentionally, to maintaining and even strengthening global academic hierarchies. Institutions that already have strong resources and international connections tend to remain at the top, while others can remain invisible when they play an important role in their local or regional context. The situation is particularly visible in many global south systems, including in the Moroccan context, where universities often combine teaching, regional development and social missions that are not fully captured by global indicators [67]. In light of these challenges, it becomes difficult to argue that technical adjustments alone will be sufficient. More fundamental reforms appear necessary, especially those that promote transparency, inclusiveness and more multidimensional approaches to evaluation. a first step could be to use a broader set of qualitative indicators and not focus only on digital or quantitative measures of impact [115] [116]. This may include aspects such as community engagement, pedagogical innovation or social contributions, which remain central to the missions of many universities but still not are still marginal in current ranking models. A second point is that ranking agencies should work more closely with universities and recognize them as active stakeholders in defining of criteria and methodologies. This would mean moving away from a form of digital paternalism where institutions simply adapt to external standards, and toward more participatory and collaborative approaches that allow institutions to express their priorities and contexts [55] [117] [108]. Some initiatives already move in this direction, but they remain limited and their influence is still relatively weak. Third

policymakers also have an important responsibility. There is a need to regulate potential conflicts of interest and to limit the growing influence of commercial logics in ranking systems. Without such safeguards, rankings risk becoming tools of financialization and market competition rather than instruments for improving quality and accountability [118] [119]. At the same time alternative models such as mission based or regional rankings may provide more context sensitive perspectives. These approaches could recognize different institutional priorities and avoid imposing a single global hierarchy That does not reflect the diversity of higher education systems [81] [120]. For many emerging universities, these alternatives may be more meaningful and more aligned with national development goals. While these alternatives offer promising paths for reform, they also highlight how many aspects of ranking systems remain insufficiently understood, and several questions raised throughout this discussion deserve more empirical attention, such as how ranking organizations collect, validate and standardize institutional data, despite the role these processes play in shaping global hierarchies. At a broader level, the debate may benefit from moving beyond the search for more refined indicators, since the challenge is not only methodological but also conceptual. Questions surrounding who defines excellence, which forms of knowledge are recognized, and whose interests are embedded in evaluation frameworks remain insufficiently addressed. Bringing together quantitative evidence, qualitative aspects and contextual analysis may open the way toward evaluation models that acknowledge institutional diversity rather than compress it into a single hierarchy. Ultimately even if digitalization has changed the way universities are evaluated and perceived, there is a strong need for more balanced and equitable systems of assessment that recognize institutional diversity, protects intellectual integrity and values social engagement rather than associating excellence only with digital visibility and financial power.

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