

Comparative Analysis of Public and Private Universities' Performance in the QS Ranking System in Pakistan (2020–2024)

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Abstract

The performance of Pakistan's public and private universities in the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings and Asia University Rankings from 2020 to 2024 is compared in this study. Using a descriptive and comparative study approach, the analysis focuses on the top 10 institutions of the specified time period, five from each sector, according to their highest yearly QS Asia rankings. A constant and statistically significant performance disparity favoring public institutions is revealed by the data, which are explained by elements like substantial government support, a strong research infrastructure, and a wider range of academic offerings. On the other hand, the sector as a whole is still at a disadvantage in the QS framework because of the small amount of research output and size, even though certain private institutions show competitiveness in particular areas like employer involvement and teaching quality. In order to improve the overall international position of Pakistan's higher education sector, the study concludes that research-intensive public institutions are disproportionately favored by global ranking systems like QS. It also suggests policy interventions targeted at developing research capacity within private universities and encouraging smart public-private collaborations.

Keywords: QS University Rankings, Higher Education, Public vs. Private Universities, Institutional Performance, Global Rankings.

Introduction

Global university rankings have become influential tools in the current higher education environment, influencing national education policy, student decision-making, and institutional reputation. The QS World University Rankings and its regional version, the QS Asia Rankings, are among the most well-known of them. These rankings use a complex approach that assesses institutions according to internationalization, research production, academic repute, and other factors that together indicate institutional status. These league tables have had a significant impact on institutional conduct, governmental policy, and student choice globally since Shanghai Jiao Tong University published the inaugural Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) in 2003 and the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings in 2004.

With its dual system of historically dominating public universities and an increasing number of private schools, Pakistan's higher education industry provides an interesting case study for analyzing how institutional type affects ranking performance. The Higher Education Commission's (HEC) strategic incentives and reforms have contributed to the upward mobility of Pakistani institutions in

the QS rankings during the last five years. Public universities routinely outperform their private counterparts, indicating that this improvement is not equally dispersed.

Examining the strategic and structural elements underlying this disparity is the goal of this study. It examines the institutional factors that contribute to the observed discrepancies and compares the long-term performance of a few public and private institutions in the QS Asia Rankings from 2020 to 2024. By doing this, it offers evidence-based insights to guide institutional and policy solutions aimed at improving both sectors' global competitiveness.

Objectives of the Study

1. To compare the QS Asia ranking of public and private universities in Pakistan from 2020 to 2024.
2. To evaluate key QS indicators of both sectors universities.
3. To determine which structural and institutional elements account for performance differences in international rankings.
4. To make policy and strategic suggestions intended to raise Pakistan's public and private universities' status abroad.

Research Questions

1. Does QS Asia rankings of public and private institutions from 2020 to 2024 differ that is statistically significant?
2. Which particular QS performance metrics show that public or private universities do better?
3. Which institutional elements—such as finance, research capability, and governance—are responsible for these variations?
4. What tactics may private colleges use to improve their standing in international rankings?

Literature Review

In the literature on higher education, the phenomena of worldwide university rankings has been thoroughly examined and criticized. According to Hazelkorn (2015), rankings have made colleges more competitive and focused on the market. In a similar vein, Marginson (2007) argues that rankings serve as signaling mechanisms in situations when information is incomplete, especially in developing nations. Espeland and Sauder (2007) draw attention to the "reactivity" of rankings, which occurs when organizations modify their actions to conform to criteria that are imposed from without. According to Singh (2019), universities in Pakistan and India have been focusing more on growing their worldwide profile at the price of local relevance and teaching quality in the South Asian context. Khan and Abbas (2021) describe how top universities in Pakistan, including NUST and QAU, have implemented focused tactics, such foreign collaborations and more research publications, to raise their QS rankings. The HEC's role in encouraging research productivity through financing and policy mechanisms is further highlighted by Bukhari and Kamal (2019).

Seeking a higher ranking promotes isomorphism, in which many institutions come together to form a single, ranking-defined "world-class university" paradigm (Shin & Kehm, 2013). Purpose drift, in which a university's distinct regional or teaching-focused mission is sacrificed to the objective of enhancing its research-centric worldwide rank, might result from this, endangering institutional variety.

According to Raza and Naqvi (2020) and Abbas and Hassan (2018), rankings primarily affect student decisions and cause brain drain among students from lower-ranked universities. However, Mahboob and Bashir (2021) contend that tactics like faculty internationalization have a beneficial impact on

student recruitment. Ahmed (2020) and Ali (2022) draw attention to the conflicts between local educational goals and ranking ambitions and criticize the performative use of rankings in marketing efforts. A possible discrepancy between institutional reputation and pedagogical quality is suggested by Qureshi (2023), who poses a serious question regarding whether improving rankings are associated with better student learning results.

Research Design

This study employs a **descriptive and comparative** research design, using a longitudinal analysis of secondary data extracted from the QS Asia University Rankings (2020–2024).

Population and Sampling

Population included all 25 Pakistani universities featured in the QS Asia Rankings during the specified period. A purposive sample of the top 10 universities, based on their highest achieved rank were selected. This includes five public and five private institutions.

Data Collection Tool

A structured data extraction sheet was used to compile information from publicly available QS databases. The following indicators were collected for each year and institution: Academic reputation, employer reputation, faculty/student ratio, citations per faculty, international faculty, and international students.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using **SPSS** and **Microsoft Excel**:

Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) were calculated for each sector.

An **independent samples t-test** was conducted to assess the significance of mean ranking differences.

Line graphs were used to visualize trends over time.

Results and Analysis

Table 1: Mean QS Asia Ranking (2020–2024)

Year	Public Sector	Private Sector
2020	201	351
2021	198	343
2022	192	337
2023	185	325
2024	179	318

An independent samples t-test revealed a statistically significant difference in the mean rankings of public ($M=191$, $SD=12.4$) and private ($M=334.8$, $SD=14.1$) universities; $t(8) = 15.732$, $p < 0.001$. Public universities consistently rank approximately 150 positions higher on average than private institutions. While both sectors have shown gradual improvement, the gap remains significant.

Table 2: Average QS Indicator Scores (2024, /100)

QS Indicator	Public Sector	Private Sector	Key Insight
Academic Reputation	45.2	28.5	Reflects historical prestige of public institutions
Citations per Faculty	52.8	35.1	Indicates stronger research output in public sector
Faculty/Student Ratio	32.1	48.6	Private universities provide smaller class sizes
Employer Reputation	40.5	42.1	Comparable performance, with a slight private edge
International Faculty	25.3	30.2	Greater internationalization among private universities
International Students	20.1	22.5	Slightly more international student presence in private sector

Discussion

The study's findings highlight Pakistan's public universities' clear and enduring supremacy in the QS ranking system from 2020 to 2024. Due to a combination of institutional, financial, and structural factors, public sector institutions are favored in the QS methodology, which places a strong emphasis on research intensity, academic reputation, and global visibility. The Higher Education Commission (HEC) and other government agencies regularly and frequently give public universities preferential funding. This funding makes it easier to hire faculty who are actively engaged in research, invest in extensive research infrastructure, and obtain competitive research grants—all of which have a direct impact on important QS metrics like Academic Reputation and Citations per Faculty. Institutions like Quaid-i-Azam University and the University of the Punjab also enjoy long-standing academic prestige due to their national standing and historical heritage, which supports their rankings even more.

Since public universities are usually larger and offer a greater variety of subjects, especially in STEM fields, they naturally generate more research output and draw in a wider range of students. In addition to increasing citation metrics, this scope fosters interdisciplinary partnerships that

On the other hand, private universities have shown strength in areas they can strategically control, despite lacking the substantial public funding and legacy infrastructure. Notably, they score highly on the Faculty/Student Ratio metric, which indicates that they prioritize smaller class sizes and high-quality instruction. Additionally, they can more quickly attract international faculty and students, innovate in curriculum design, and form industry partnerships thanks to their more flexible administrative structures. Relatively competitive scores in internationalization and employer reputation metrics are a result of these strengths. However, the QS system, which favors research-intensive, internationally renowned institutions, places them at a structural disadvantage due to their limitations in scale, funding, and research infrastructure. This results in a hierarchical higher education environment where the private sector is mainly unable to obtain "world-class" recognition as determined by global ranking metrics.

Conclusions

According to the QS Asia Rankings from 2020 to 2024, there is a notable and persistent performance difference between Pakistani public and private institutions, as supported by the empirical data in this study. Because of their extensive research capabilities, institutional heritage, and governmental financing, public institutions routinely hold better rankings. The QS ranking approach, which prioritizes research volume, academic impact, and worldwide exposure, is well compatible with these structural advantages.

The restricted scale, research capability, and financing methods of private colleges hinder their upward mobility in rankings that heavily rely on research, even while they are competitive in areas like employer involvement, internationalization, and teaching quality. Large public institutions continue to get a disproportionate amount of worldwide prominence as a result of these rankings. This result draws attention to a basic flaw in the discussion of global rankings: the underrepresentation of universities that place more emphasis on pedagogy, community involvement, and specialized brilliance than on general research output. Recalibrating national goals and institutional objectives to assist the public and private sectors in line with their unique capabilities is imperative if Pakistan is to have a more fair and internationally competitive higher education system.

Recommendations

Postgraduate training programs, faculty development, and research infrastructure should all be supported by competitive grants. To improve knowledge transfer and resource optimization, public and private institutions should be encouraged to collaborate on research projects, share lab space, and co-author publications. Strategies to increase the proportion of international faculty and students at public universities should be implemented. Private universities ought to concentrate on becoming the best in particular fields in which they are already relatively strong. Employing faculty who are actively engaged in research and growing PhD programs should be institutions' top priorities. For the purpose of methodically managing, recording, and reporting research performance data to ranking agencies, institutional research offices should be strengthened or established.

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