

How Do Students Use Rankings?

The role of university rankings in international student choice

May 2015



About the project

This report emerged from a project initiated by the QS Intelligence Unit, conducted in partnership with the QS Digital Solutions team. It is co-authored by Dasha Karzunina and Laura Bridgestock, with design from Georgia Philippou.

The trends presented are primarily based on a series of 11 focus groups held in London, Paris, Milan, Rome and Moscow, involving a total of 71 prospective students representing 19 nationalities. To complement this qualitative data, we ran a short survey, collecting 519 responses.

All participants were attendees at QS international education fairs (five events targeted at postgraduates and one at undergraduates), and the majority were interested in studying outside of their own country. Most participants were in the process of applying for postgraduate courses (primarily master's but some PhD), though undergraduate applicants were also represented in both the survey and focus groups. There was a good balance of male and female participants, with most aged between 16 and 25.

Dasha Karzunina

As International Research Liaison for the QS Intelligence Unit, Dasha Karzunina combines a largely public-facing role with extensive involvement in the unit's research, analysis and reporting initiatives. Leading on key partner and client relationships, she liaises with university officials and students, and presents at higher education conferences worldwide. She recently delivered the analysis and a successful launch event for the first edition of the QS University Rankings: Emerging Europe and Central Asia. Coming from a student leadership background, Dasha represented the academic interests of over 30,000 students in one of the biggest students' unions in the UK. During her time as Education Officer at Nottingham University, she ran a series of insight projects into student experience and campaigned for universities to improve their offering.

Laura Bridgestock

Part of the QS Digital Solutions team, Laura Bridgestock is the editor of *TopUniversities.com* – the student-focused platform on which the QS World University Rankings® is published. Attracting more than 21 million unique visitors in 2014, the site is one of the world's most-visited resources for prospective students, offering informative content, an international blogging community and student forums. As well as being involved in the ongoing development of QS's online resources for students, Laura also contributes to the company's work in providing insights for the higher education sector, having recently authored the 2014 Students Online: Global Trends report.

Georgia Philippou

Graphic designer Georgia Philippou also works within the QS Digital Solutions team, creating innovative infographics and visualisations based on QS's research and rankings. Her work is featured on *TopUniversities.com* and *TopMBA.com*, and across the company's multimedia offerings, including video and social media. Georgia has also taken a leading role on many of the team's publications, including a range of e-papers and the 2014 report Finding the Right MBA.

Context & key findings

In the space of just a decade, international university rankings have become established as an essential benchmarking tool, widely consulted by institutions and students alike.

In a 2014 QS survey¹, almost 70% of prospective students classed rankings as either “essential” or “very important”, while fewer than 2% said they wouldn’t consult rankings at all. Similarly, a recent study from the World 100 Reputation Network² named rankings as the number one source of information for prospective PhD students, ahead of official university websites. Clearly – for the most ambitious international applicants in particular – rankings have become a key part of the decision-making process.

While some research has been conducted on the question of how universities are using rankings – notably by the EUA³ – little is known about how and why students consult the tables. At what stage do students consult the rankings, and how do the results influence their decisions?

These questions provided the motivation for the current report, accompanied by a survey. The findings serve to contextualise and illustrate the mostly quantitative data on rankings use, providing insights into how students perceive and approach rankings, which indicators they value most, and how rankings fit into the wider decision-making journey.

Much like those working within the higher education sector, prospective students express a balanced understanding of both the benefits and limitations of rankings. Among our sample group, in which many students are preparing for international study at postgraduate level, rankings appeal predominantly as a time-saving tool offering a reliable guide to institutional reputation, which is particularly valued as a gauge of future employment prospects.

Other key findings:

- **Rankings appear at multiple touchpoints in the student journey, from early-stage shortlisting to final tiebreaks;**
- **Students associate rankings with reputation rather than quality, seeking alternative sources for insights on the latter;**
- **Among our sample, international and subject-specific rankings are viewed as more useful than national and overall rankings;**

¹ *Students Online: Global Trends*, QS TopUniversities.com, 2014

² *How PhD Students Choose Top Universities*, World 100 Reputation Network, 2013

³ *Rankings in Institutional Strategies and Processes: Impact or Illusion?*, European University Association (EUA), 2014

- **There is significant demand for rankings to extend beyond current indicators, facilitating more in-depth university comparisons.**

Survey results

Our survey consisted of four questions, focusing on students’ preferred types of ranking and indicators, as well as their underlying reasons for consulting an international ranking.

Question 1: What geographical scope of rankings is most useful to you?



% CHOOSING GLOBAL RANKINGS

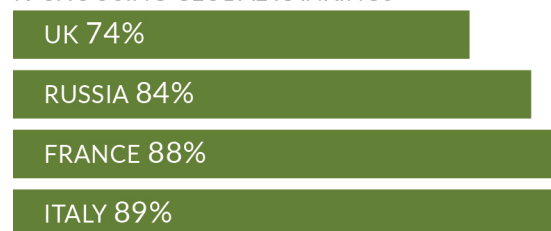


Fig. 1

This question was designed to find out whether students place a higher value on national or international rankings, with the latter divided into global and regional international rankings.

Overall, there was an emphatic preference for global rankings, with 77% of respondents identifying these as more useful than national or regional tables. This result was corroborated by our focus group conversations, where we found those planning to study a postgraduate qualification abroad were particularly likely to place a high value on global rankings – even in preference to national rankings for their intended country of study.

As you can see from Fig.1, we encountered barely any variation on this issue between the survey locations. However, we did find a significant difference between prospective undergraduates and postgraduates; the former were more likely to select national rankings as most useful.

Question 2: Do you find subject-specific or overall rankings more useful?

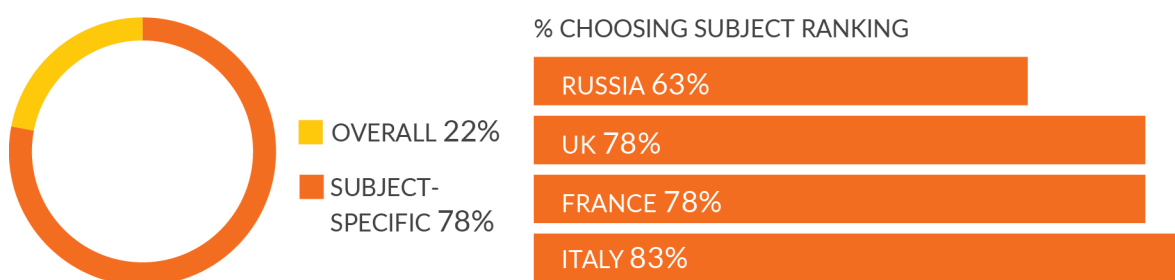


Fig. 2

Here, the overall response was overwhelmingly in favour of more specialized tools, with 78% of students saying subject-specific rankings were more useful than overall tables. There was again very little variation between survey locations, and this time undergraduate and postgraduate students were in agreement.

Question 3: Which rankings indicators are most important to you?

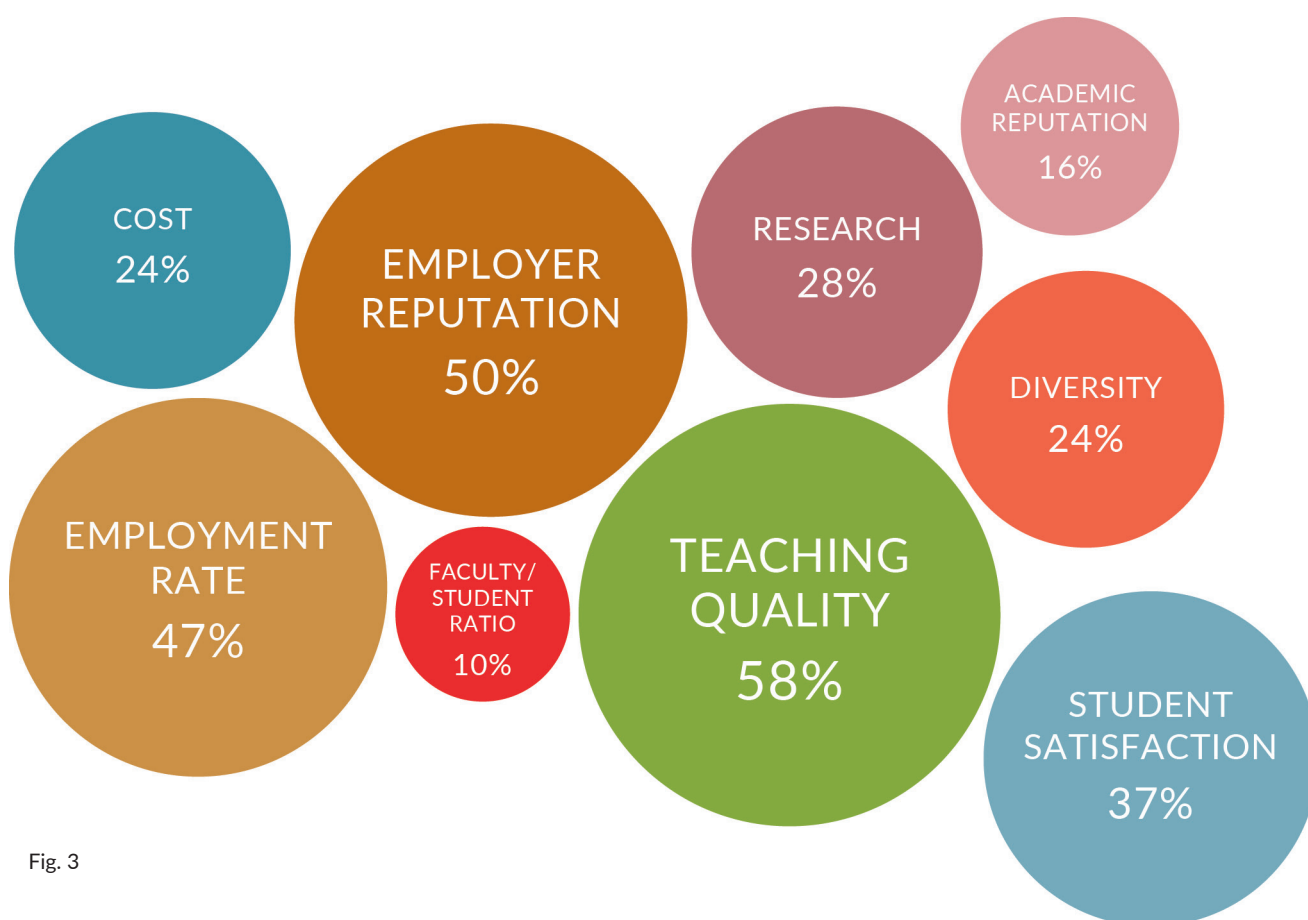


Fig. 3

Students were asked to choose three options from a list of nine, which included the current QS World University Rankings® indicators, alongside three additional aspects of university performance. The top three choices overall were: Quality of Teaching (58%); Employer Reputation (50%); and Graduate Employment Rates (47%). The aim was to establish an image of what a student-created ranking might look like – an issue explored in greater depth later in this report.

Question 4: What are the benefits of attending an internationally recognised university?

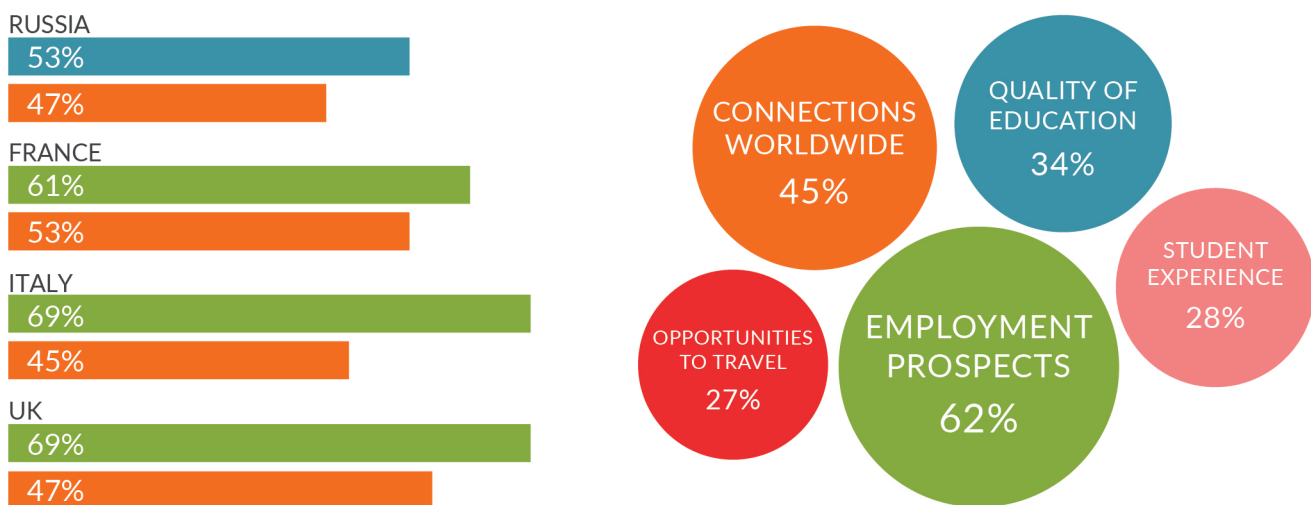


Fig. 4

Overall, the most commonly perceived benefit of graduating from an internationally recognised institution was Better Employment Prospects (selected by 62%). While this held true for most survey locations, students in Moscow bucked the trend, selecting Better Quality of Education as the leading benefit.

The second choice for students overall was Better Connections Worldwide (45%). However, among prospective undergraduate students, the second most-selected option was the prospect of a Better Student Experience (39%). In the focus groups, we likewise found undergraduate applicants more likely to prioritise the student experience, while prospective postgraduates were more likely to emphasize career outcomes. Those with a longer-term perspective were in turn more likely to place a high value on global rankings, due to the perceived connection between rankings and career prospects.

Why and how are rankings consulted?

Among our participants, the single biggest underlying motivator for consulting rankings is to get an idea of university reputation – specifically in the eyes of potential employers. Most commonly, students talk about using rankings as an early-stage shortlisting tool, alongside final decisions about subject and country of study. However, rankings continue to play a role throughout.

Rankings as an early-stage shortlisting tool

Rankings are most commonly used to create a shortlist, to ensure further research is effectively targeted. For prospective UK undergraduate Jack – only interested in universities with strong international reputations – rankings are a way to “*narrow it down*”, without wasting time researching universities which lack the required status. Similarly, for Russian PhD applicant Aydar, using rankings to identify the top 10 universities in each country helps to “*remove the clutter*” so he can be more “*focused*”.

Rankings as a quick reputation checker

Following the general approach to rankings as a guide to institutional reputation, many students consult the

tables to check a specific university’s global standing. Master’s applicant Salimatou explains, “*I was afraid when I joined a French school that it wouldn’t be internationally recognized... so it [looking at the rankings] was to reassure myself.*” For Pietro, a current master’s student in Rome, this ability to throw light on previously unheard-of institutions is potentially rankings’ most valuable offering: “*Rankings are really useful if you don’t know the university... If you have to apply for an Erasmus program and you have a list of universities you don’t know anything about, rankings could help you choose.*”

Rankings as a direct comparison tool or tie-breaker

A related use is the consultation of rankings to directly compare two or more universities, though most students say this would only make a real difference if the gap was significant – more than just a few ranking positions. For example, Italian master’s applicant Melissa says, “*I would use the ranking during the whole decision and the whole thinking process of choosing. But in the end, if I don’t know where to go, I will look at rank.*” Russian PhD applicant Alisa adds, “*Rankings could be a factor if I have a choice of several universities and some are ranked but others aren’t.*”

Rankings as a key indicator of future employment prospects

The theme of employability not only dominated our survey responses, but also emerged as a heartfelt discussion item during the focus groups. Here, the key observations are simple. A large proportion of prospective students are strongly motivated by future employment prospects when choosing a university, and they commonly approach rankings as a way of assessing this. While students are divided on the issue of whether subject-specific or overall rankings provide the best gauge of employer perspective, they overwhelmingly agree on this basic correlation between rankings and employability.

Rankings -> international reputation -> better employment prospects

It became clear that even students who don't hold global rankings in high regard still commonly feel it's important for an institution to be internationally known. This is typically connected to perceived employability benefits, as our survey results show. Our focus group discussions further confirmed that students view rankings as providing an indication of how future employers will view their qualification.

Arthur, a prospective master's student in Moscow, goes as far as to say: *"Rankings must be the only way an employer can distinguish between two candidates with the same skills and experience."* While the validity of this belief is debatable, the perception certainly exists and is affecting the way students make decisions. For some applicants, like Andrea in Rome, employment

"Rankings must be the only way an employer can distinguish between two candidates with the same skills and experience."

outcomes usurp pretty much all other considerations: *"With some subjects, whether or not graduates are employed matters more than how good academically the institution is."*

Return on investment is particularly important for international students

Our sample group consisted largely of students interested in studying, and often also working, internationally. This no doubt goes some way to explaining their preference for global rankings, and so we probed deeper into the reasons behind this.

Often, students explain their preference for global rankings as a way of ensuring their chosen institution will be recognized in whichever country they choose to seek work in, whether returning home or remaining abroad. International students place a particularly strong emphasis on their degree leading to a good return on investment, due to a sense that they are making a higher investment to begin with – in both financial and emotional terms. The latter "cost" is acknowledged by Italian student Jacubo: *"When going far overseas, you have to consider the emotional cost as it is culturally different and it's harder to go home, hence it's a bigger commitment."*

PhD applicants more likely to focus on professional connections and supervisors

In general, we found a distinction between the approach of prospective undergraduates and master's students, and that taken by prospective PhDs. The latter, often focused on pursuing careers within academia, were more likely to be concerned with opportunities to foster connections within academia and finding a good supervisor. As a result, prospective PhDs were typically less likely to place a high value on rankings, though still often consulting them for a basic background check.

For instance, Aydar, a PhD applicant in London, says: *"I don't use the rankings much, but if the university was ranked lowest in the list then I would get suspicious. I am more concerned with the kind of research the university produces."* In this respect, our experience diverges from the World 100 Reputation Network's report – in which rankings were named the top source of information for PhD applicants – but accords with its finding that the quality of the supervisor is the biggest single deciding factor for this group.

Studying abroad is expected to automatically improve employment prospects

In addition to believing that studying at a higher ranked university would boost their employment prospects, students believe studying abroad will significantly increase their value in the job market. Gulmira, an international student from Kazakhstan, believes: *"It's a necessity for everyone to study abroad now to remain competitive."* Similarly, Russian student Andrey says: *"If you want to work for an international company, you need to study abroad, even if you want to work in your home country."* Hence studying at a highly reputed institution abroad provides two distinct sources of employability value, as undergraduate applicant Linessa explains: *"Simply going to a university like Oxford shows that you're ambitious, but studying abroad shows your initiative and that you are willing to do things differently."*

How important are rankings in the overall picture?

In recognition of the complex mixture of factors considered by students when deciding where to study, we asked our project participants which factors they would place a highest priority on. While we found no overall consensus, many students do hold strong views on this issue, arguing either for or against the relative importance of specific considerations.

University rankings

Students typically view university rankings as an indication of reputation; their perspectives on “ranking” and “reputation” are very closely connected, and we therefore use these terms interchangeably. We encountered three main stances:

- 1) Ranking position is everything
- 2) Ranking position is important, but doesn't necessarily reflect quality
- 3) Ranking position is not reflective of quality and largely doesn't matter

There are few students in either the first or third of these categories. The majority express a belief in the importance of rankings (and reputation), though remaining sceptical about the degree of correlation between reputation and quality. Similarly, while many students say they wouldn't mind going to an averagely ranked university, many would be concerned if the university was low- or unranked.

Despite the “rank is everything” view being rare, many students concede that they would in fact be willing to compromise on their choice of a program and/or location for an exceptionally renowned university. As Andrea from Rome says: *“I wouldn't compromise program for university, unless it was a really outstanding university!”* Similarly, Italian PhD applicant Lorenzo admits: *“Whilst I agree that program is key, if I got an offer from Harvard, I would go there no matter what.”*

Students' prioritisation of rank is often connected to perceived employment outcomes. As US student Angelica summarizes: *“The name is really the most important, because then you have it on your CV.”* For some students, this means being willing to compromise in other areas. UK master's applicant Ffion provides an example of this: *“I've definitely chosen the ranking over my subject. I really want to go to Imperial just because of the rankings, and [to make that possible] I've chosen a subject that I'm less interested in... because of the employment rate after.”*

Program

Another group of students, meanwhile, are strong advocates for the importance of choosing a university

primarily based on the quality and relevance of the specific program. Again this perspective is often explained with reference to employment outcomes;

“Whilst I agree that program is key, if I got an offer from Harvard, I would go there no matter what.”

students argue that choosing based on the program would lead to careers of most interest to them. Others point out that choosing based on the program is likely to mean they'll enjoy the course more – and therefore potentially do better academically, again leading to a brighter future.

Students in certain subject areas seem more likely to prioritise reputation, believing it matters more for careers in their field; this trend is particularly noticeable among FAME (finance, accounting, management and economics) students. On the other hand, those studying highly specialized courses, offered by relatively few institutions, are understandably more likely to prioritize program over rankings – again often citing employment outcomes as their motivation.

In general, students agree that overall reputation does not necessarily speak for every single discipline, as Italian undergraduate applicant Sarah argues: *“The name of the university is not the most important thing. There are... famous universities which are not the best in that subject.”*

Location

Students usually talk about choosing a country towards the start of their research, as an initial way of narrowing the field before consulting rankings. A typical process is set out by Koffi, a master's student in Paris: *“I choose the country first, then the city, then I choose the university. So essentially, first [I consider] the country and then the ranking.”*

However, location continues to feature in the decision-making process right up to the final stage; it's also about choosing the “right” city and ensuring access to desirable facilities and lifestyle. Before committing to an institution, students ideally want to get a feel for the campus, local area and student community – and for international applicants, the difficulty of assessing these aspects from a distance is a common frustration.

While all students consider location to some extent when making their choice, there are big differences in

what they're looking for. For some – such as Valeria in Milan – the issue is highly emotive and personal: *“I’ve loved England since I was a child, so it’s a personal, emotional and a cultural connection.”* For others, employment prospects are – once again – at the fore. Jacubo, a PhD applicant in Milan, says he willingly compromised on lifestyle: *“I chose Canada... industrial growth was huge, but it was socially boring. If I had to make the decision again, I would choose the same again – professional over social life.”*

Cost

Finally, cost is an important consideration for almost all students. Few students speak about cost as a principal

element in their decision-making, but it is nonetheless a factor most need to bear in mind right from start of the process and throughout each stage. As Alexander in Moscow jokes: *“Before consulting the rankings, I consult my bank account.”*

While inevitably the decision-making process involves prioritising certain factors over others, this is not always viewed by students negatively – but rather as a challenge to be successfully negotiated. Francesco, in Rome, says: *“Finding a university is a negotiation between tuition fee, image of the university and the program. If you have a strong CV, you shouldn’t have to compromise.”*

What would a student-created ranking look like?

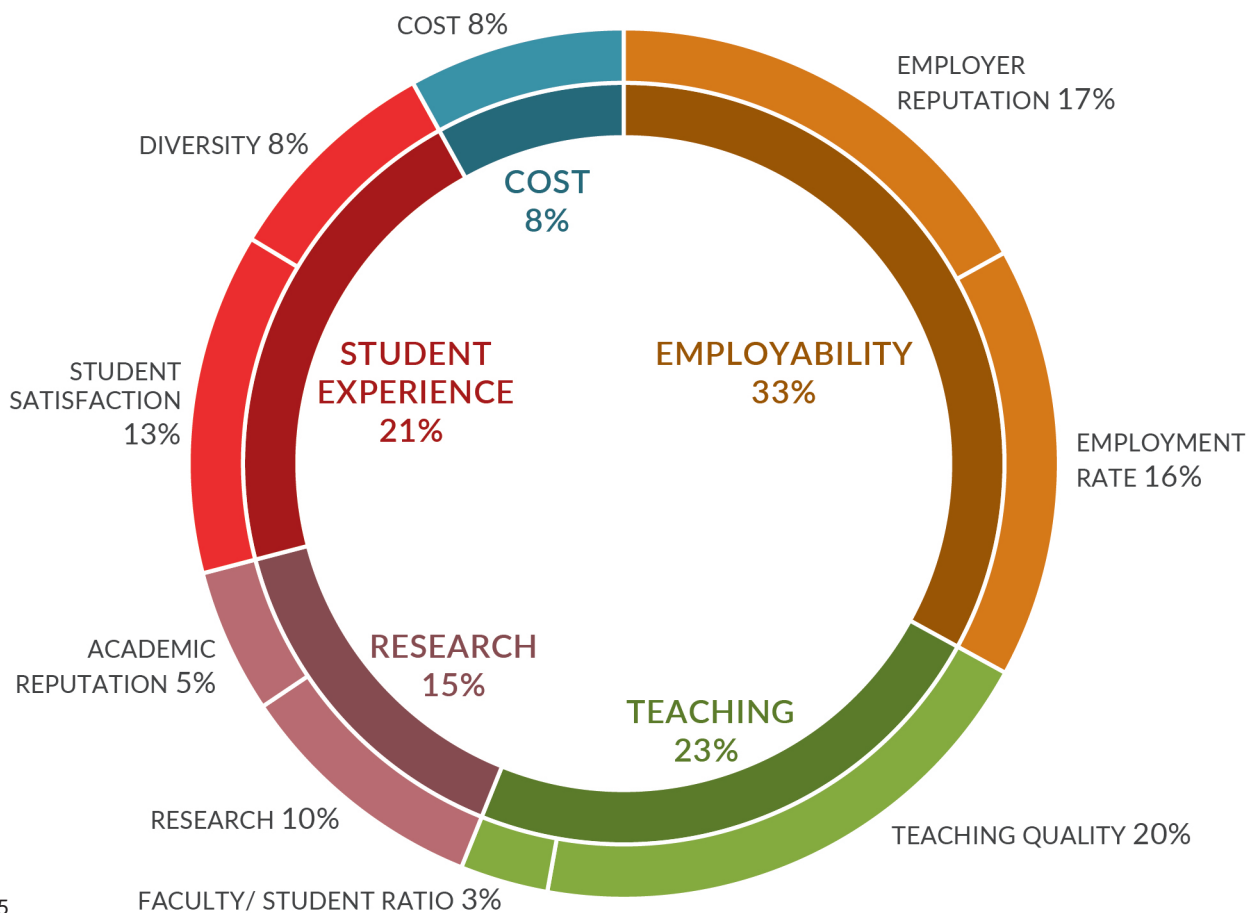


Fig. 5

As well as exploring the extent to which students’ priorities are reflected in existing rankings systems, we wanted to find out what students themselves would ideally like to see included – assuming access to unlimited data and resources. Desirable indicators selected in the survey and suggested in the focus groups were diverse, with examples including quality of research output, male/female ratio and quality of social life. There were some factors, however, that were frequently and passionately highlighted by students in all the countries we visited. Fig. 5 above represents

hypothetical weightings students would apply to their chosen indicators, where the size of each is proportional to the number of votes it received.

Teaching quality and faculty/student ratio (20% & 3%)

The most popular option in the survey, and a recurrent issue in the focus groups, quality of teaching is undoubtedly something prospective students really care about. However, there are differences of opinion when it comes to both defining and measuring “quality

of teaching". For PhD applicants, quality of teaching is closely associated with the specific supervisor, but also with the standard of research produced by the wider faculty. For instance, Aydar in London says: *"I look at the reputation of the department to see if their research is impacting the world."*

More generally, class size, faculty/student ratio, facilities and the characteristics of individual teaching staff – particularly an ability to deliver material in an engaging way – all feed into students' understanding of high-quality teaching. While many students concede that reliably measuring quality of teaching itself is near-impossible, they suggest certain proxies that could be used, such as assessing faculty members' qualifications and experience. For example, Arthur from Moscow suggests: *"Noble Prizes should be measured, as that means smart lecturers want to teach at that university and I would certainly want to learn from them."* However, others are aware that awards and academic qualifications do not necessarily translate into better teaching.

Employer reputation and employment rate (17% & 16%)

As emphasized throughout this report, students' decisions are often strongly influenced by a desire to improve their own employment prospects, getting a strong return on investment. During our conversations, it became apparent that there is high demand not just for comparisons based on overall employment rates, but also much more specific information about the roles, sectors and salaries of graduates. Anna in London says: *"Graduate employment rate is important, especially for students to be getting work in relevant sectors."* Rachida in Paris adds: *"I would want to know names of the firms where graduates go on to work."* And Jacubo in Milan suggests: *"Universities often have banners of their most prominent professors; what they should have however is banners of their most prominent alumni."*

Research and academic reputation (10% & 5%)

These two factors are grouped together as we found students tended to perceive them as closely connected. Academic reputation is more often associated with the internal quality of a university than employer reputation; students expect academics' perspectives to provide a better indication of teaching and research quality. Understandably, PhD students are particularly keen to select institutions producing high-quality research with a strong reputation in the academic world. Even those applying for undergraduate degrees, however, are interested in these factors. Referring to the importance of overall international reputation, prospective undergraduate Jack says, *"While it's not always the case, universities with a better reputation tend to have better facilities, and also research facilities."*

Student satisfaction (13%)

This was the next most popular option in the survey. During focus group discussions, we found this had two components: student experience in terms of the academic life (teaching quality, support availability, etc.), and student experience overall (social life, campus facilities, etc.). Many students are keen advocates of

"I would want to know names of the firms where graduates go on to work."

student satisfaction surveys and enthusiastic about seeing these incorporated into university rankings – often viewing peer reviews as the most reliable way to gauge the quality of a specific program and institution as a whole. Andreas in Paris says: *"It's more important to contact alumni than the administration. They have the experience."*

However, some students recognise that student satisfaction may not be a reliable basis for comparison. Gilberto in Milan does believe the overall student experience is important: *"Personal development is really important and this is not something the reputation of the university can guarantee."* However, he is sceptical about using student satisfaction as a measure: *"Student satisfaction is a tricky measure because it's all subjective, so won't make a good indicator. Facts and figures are better."*

Diversity (8%)

At all levels of study, many students place a high value on diversity within the university community. They typically equate a more diverse student body with a more interesting, engaging and fulfilling student experience, and expect diversity among professors to enhance the quality of education. This widespread belief is expressed by Ali in London, who says: *"Different ways of measuring diversity would be important, such as the number of international students and backgrounds, the amount of countries represented."* Some students look to access other measures of diversity such as the number of students with disabilities and gender ratios. Prospective undergraduate Bronwyn says, *"Boy/girl ratio should be measured; having a course that's all one sex can be a limiting experience."*

Conclusions & implications

The results of this project suggest high rates of rankings use are closely connected to students' perception of a correlation between rank, reputation and employment prospects.

Yet, although students typically approach rankings as a guide to reputation, rather than internal quality, the picture is more complex. Both our survey results and focus groups indicate that students do expect some degree of correlation between reputation and quality, anticipating that highly reputed universities will provide a higher-quality experience all-round. This provides an additional motivation for rankings use.

The project also serves to highlight the fact that rankings are rarely consulted in isolation. For the vast majority of students, rankings are approached as one piece in a multifaceted puzzle – or “negotiation” – in which the importance of reputation is considered alongside program specifications, location, cost and other factors.

Based on the results of the project, it's possible to identify the main limitations of current rankings systems in students' eyes, and the following key areas for future resource development:

More comparisons at program level

One of the strongest demands from students is for more ways to compare specific programs, rather than universities overall. Italian master's applicant Valerio summarizes a common frustration: “*The problem with rankings is that they don't see the specific program.*” This demand for program-level comparisons is a key factor in the popularity of subject-specific rankings, and the students we spoke to welcomed ongoing extensions to such resources, while also expressing demand for even more granular comparisons based on specific programs.

Even greater emphasis on measures linked to employability

One of the most consistent trends throughout the project is the association of rankings with employer reputation and employment prospects. Students already value rankings for this reason, but we found demand for additional data – particularly based on employment rates. For universities, this is further confirmation of the importance of employment outcomes for today's students, with implications for both service provision and marketing messages.

Methods of comparing teaching quality

This is one of the most widely acknowledged limitations of rankings; there is no objective or realistically implementable method available to support comparisons based on teaching quality. As discussed earlier in the report, students accept that this is not an

easily or reliably quantified element, but many students nonetheless expect rankings providers to at least attempt to fill this gap.

More supplementary information and comparisons

More broadly, the demand for more comprehensive comparison tools extends far beyond typical rankings indicators. Much, though not all, of the desired data is already available via university websites, peer review platforms, scholarship databases and elsewhere. But there's demand for greater integration, with scope for rankings to provide a hub from which all this information could be accessed via a single platform. This presents both opportunities and challenges for rankings providers; there's immense scope for increased data collection and syndication, accompanied by increasingly sophisticated interactive comparison tools.

“It takes a lot of time to understand exactly what the rankings are telling you.”

More user-friendly ways to interpret rankings

Finally, while most students possess a reasonable awareness of the kind of indicators university rankings are based on, very few actually take time to consult the methodology. This can lead to confusion over disparities between different rankings, in some cases undermining their utility. For instance, master's applicant Valerio complains, “*The same university is fourth in one ranking, and very different in another ranking. So I don't know which one is the right one.*” However, time taken to interpret rankings detracts from their appeal as a time-saving device. As fellow Italian applicant Francesco says, “*It takes a lot of time to understand exactly what the rankings are telling you and how to manipulate these results... I will waste time.*” Here, the challenge for rankings providers is to increase transparency and make top-level results easy and quick to unpack.

Notwithstanding the sampling limitations of this research, which further studies may serve to remedy, our findings confirm that rankings have become an essential part of the decision-making process for many students but in divergent ways. The most consistent concern for students centres on how an institution's reputation intersects with the employment prospects that it confers upon its graduates.

About QS

Established in 1990, QS is dedicated to providing independent and authoritative research and resources for both prospective students and higher education providers worldwide. The QS World University Rankings®, published annually since 2004 and hosted on student-focused platform TopUniversities.com, is among the most-consulted resources in the sector.

In response to growing public demand for comparative data on universities and other higher education providers, and for institutions to develop deeper insight into their competitive environment, the QS Intelligence Unit was formed in 2008. Committed to the key values of rigorous integrity, undeniable value, unique insight and charismatic presentation, QSIU strives to be the most trusted independent source of global intelligence on the higher education sector.

In addition to the research and insights provided by QSIU, the company offers a range of services to help prospective international students find the right institution – and vice versa. This includes a global series of higher education fairs; an annual publication cycle of guides, reports and e-papers; and a dynamic range of online platforms.



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