



INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY RANKING SYSTEMS

In the international Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings 2021, al-Farabi Kazakh National University rose to the 165th position right after the British University of Exeter and ahead of the American Rochester University and Taiwan's National Tsing Hua University. This fact can be regarded as a significant success for the al-Farabi Kazakh National University as one of the leading universities in Kazakhstan, but in another authoritative rating – the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings 2021 – the university is incomparably lower – In the 1000+ group, together with the Gumilyov Eurasian National University and Satbaev University. At the same time, the aforementioned Taiwan's Tsing Hua University (not to be confused with the Tsinghua University of Beijing) is approximately 600 positions higher, in the 351-400 group of the THE ranking. Why are the results so strikingly different? The reason lies in the differing methodologies and data used to compile the rankings.

First of all, it should be mentioned that there are different types of rankings – global, regional, and national, which students can be guided by when choosing a future *alma mater* or which government structures can use when determining internal educational policy.

At the global level, in addition to the already mentioned QS World University Rankings and THE World University Rankings, the most well-known is the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), created by Shanghai Jiao Tong University and compiled since 2003. It features an exceptional focus on university research and counts the number of articles published in the journals Nature and Science, as well as the number of winners of the Nobel Prize and the Fields Medal (International Medal for Outstanding Discoveries in Mathematics) among university professors.

Unlike the ARWU, the QS ranking relies more on data from surveys of academics and employers, collects such data as citations per faculty member and the ratio of teaching staff and students, as well as the number of foreign faculty and students. The subjective indicator (the opinions of academics) accounts for 40% of the overall score of a university, which, in our opinion, is quite a lot. QS also uses a survey of employers to determine which universities have the best reputation for producing qualified graduates, and again,

this data may not be completely objective. For instance, some universities are known to encourage their “supporters” to respond positively to reputation polls.

THE collaborated with QS for several years on the annual world university rankings, but then, with the help of Thomson-Reuters, developed its own methodology based on 13 separate performance indicators. Today the THE World University Ranking is the largest, as it includes more than 1,500 universities from 93 countries and territories.

However, the top 10 universities in all three of the above rankings are almost the same, with minimal differences from year to year. These are Oxford, Cambridge, University of California, Stanford, Berkeley, MIT, Harvard, Princeton, Chicago University, and two-three other U.S. universities (Caltech, Columbia University, etc.). Changes are mostly observed in the top 100 or top 200, where Asian universities are increasingly penetrating. There are other global rankings – U.S. News, the Taiwan Council for the Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education (HEE-ACT), the Russian rating agency RatER, the Leiden rating, the EU U-Multirank rating, and others, but they all pay maximum attention to the research component, focusing on the world-wide popular U.S. model of a research university.

While most global rankings overly focus on research and reputation, regional and national rankings try to reverse this trend by attaching more importance to teaching and learning, as well as student and community engagement, the social mission of universities, etc. This means that regional and national rankings are more focused on educational activities and younger local universities. National rankings, which measure student satisfaction among other things, are widely used in about 30 countries in Asia, Europe, North America, South America, and Oceania. They allow more socially oriented universities lacking long-term reputation to advance. Experts argue that students are more interested in the quality of teaching than in the academic performance of a university, especially at the undergraduate level, but this quality is very difficult to measure.

The British government attempted to develop a new framework for recognizing high-quality teaching and raising its profile in universities to introduce new incentives and standards, and elevate teaching to the same status as research. Part of the idea behind the Teaching Excellence

Framework (TEF) was that the government would provide more detailed data to help students choose which university or college to attend.

The British TEF ranking assesses three criteria: the quality of teaching, that is, teaching, which sets new tasks and incentives for students, and activates the educational process; the learning environment, that is, resources and activities aimed at retention, progress, and academic performance of students; and, finally, results of teaching students, especially from disadvantaged families. Particular attention is paid to student satisfaction and their progress towards work.

Top universities are awarded the gold, silver, or bronze status as a result of the TEF, which is expected to impact student recruitment, as well as allow universities that have received the TEF award to raise tuition fees above the current limit of £9,000 in line with inflation.

While many experts believe that rankings are a marketing tool, they also meet the growing public demand for transparency and accountability in higher education. The influence of global rankings can hardly be overestimated. Specially created departments at universities work on improving their rankings by forming task forces, organizing seminars, inviting paid consultants, etc. All these measures are very similar to the work of large corporations and marketing companies and divert significant resources from the main function of universities.

The positive effect of rankings consists in determining the place of a particular university in the general system of higher education and assessing the strengths and weaknesses of its activities, which is especially important for new participants from countries not previously covered by rankings. But care must be taken to ensure that the ranking process does not become a race for higher positions. Sometimes a paradoxical situation develops when reputation, that is, what one thinks about a university, becomes more important than student satisfaction, that is, what a university does. The dominance of market factors over social and cultural factors sometimes leads to a decrease in the quality of education and the oblivion of the mission of higher education – to expand the sphere of knowledge, preserve and pass it on to future generations.

Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- During his official visit to Hungary, President of Kyrgyzstan Sooronbai Zheenbekov held talks with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban. The parties signed a joint declaration on strategic partnership, a memorandum on the establishment of the Kyrgyz-Hungarian development fund and other bilateral documents. The leaders of the two countries also visited the Representation Office of the Turkic Council in Budapest and learned about its efforts to enhance cooperation between the Turkic World and Europe (President of the Kyrgyz Republic, 29-30.09.2020).
- Foreign ministers of Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan Chingiz Aidarbekov and Mohammad Hanif Atmar held online talks to discuss topical issues of bilateral relations. In particular, the ministers considered projects to support the Afghan Kyrgyz residing in the Big and Little Pamir. In addition, the parties exchanged views on the further development of infrastructure projects and regional integration. Minister Aidarbekov expressed support for the intra-Afghan reconciliation process launched in Doha (MFA of Kyrgyzstan, 01.10.2020).
- Foreign Minister of Turkmenistan Rashid Meredov held a videoconference meeting with his Afghan counterpart Mohammad Haneef Atmar. The parties discussed the key issues of bilateral cooperation in political-diplomatic, trade-economic and cultural-humanitarian fields. Particular attention was paid to the multilateral transport and energy projects, such as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline and the electrical and fiber-optic communication lines on the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan route (MFA of Turkmenistan, 04.10.2020).
- Authorities of Poland deported five Tajik nationals suspected of having links to the Islamic State group and recruiting Polish and Ukrainian citizens for terrorist acts. Four suspects were detained in May 2020, while the fifth suspect, who fled Poland in December 2019, was arrested later with the assistance of international counterterrorism entities. According to Poland's Agency for Domestic Security, the fifth suspect planned to travel to Syria (RFE/RL, 29.09.2020).
- Russian President Vladimir Putin had a videoconference meeting with his Moldovan counterpart Igor Dodon. According to President Putin, at Moldova's request, Russia allocated up to 500 million rubles (\$6.4 million) of humanitarian aid to supply Moldovan agricultural companies hit by a drought with diesel fuel. President Dodon expressed gratitude to the Russian side for a loan of €200 million to support Moldova's economy (President of Russia, 28.09.2020).
- In a statement regarding hostilities between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia announced that Georgia was ready to facilitate the peace restoration process, including by hosting talks of the parties of the conflict in Tbilisi. Gakharia called on the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs and international actors to make every effort to end the escalation that will have an extremely negative impact on security of the entire region (Agenda.ge, 30.09.2020).

Economy, Finance, and Energy

- Kazakhstan and the Eurasian Development Bank (EDB) plan to strengthen cooperation as the bank intends to participate in the implementation of the Kazakhstan-Russia cross-border cooperation program. The parties also discussed the possibility of the EDB's involvement in the Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan Central Asia international center for trade and economic cooperation, as well as in the creation of Kazakhstan's national commodity distribution system. By the end of 2020, the EDB's total investment in Kazakhstan will reach \$1.5 billion (The Astana Times, 01.10.2020).
- The Ministry of Investments and Foreign Trade of Uzbekistan and the Ministry of Trade of Turkey held talks via videoconference. The parties considered the results of six rounds of expert negotiations on an agreement on preferential trade to be signed between the two countries. Close attention was paid to the finalization of a short list of goods, in respect of which preferential conditions for market access will be provided on a reciprocal basis (UzA, 03.10.2020).
- The seventh meeting of the Tajikistan-Uzbekistan intergovernmental commission on trade and economic cooperation was held in Dushanbe. The parties agreed to develop joint projects in light and food industries, electrical engineering, mechanical engineering, pharmaceuticals and the production of building materials. They also agreed to simplify customs and border control procedures and eliminate existing barriers. During the subsequent business forum, the parties signed 308 investment and trade agreements worth \$724 million (UzDaily, 01.10.2020).
- According to Kyrgyzstan's Tourism Department, the country's tourism sector experiences a significant decline as it dropped by 80-90% as the result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019, the sector attracted \$400 million of investment, while its exports reached \$610 million and gross value added equaled \$430 million. However, in 2020, the department does not expect to achieve even half of these volumes due to closed borders, cancelled tours and suspended international flights (24.kg, 02.10.2020).
- At the 30th international agricultural exposition Belagro held in Minsk, Belarusian officials announced that the country's annual agricultural exports could reach \$5.8 billion by the end of 2020. In the first seven months of 2020, Belarus exported agricultural products and food worth \$3.2 billion, which is 6.5% more than in the relevant period last year. The number of countries importing food products from Belarus increased from 92 to 101 (BelTA, 30.09.2020).
- The European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development will allocate \$420 million for the railway electrification project in Ukraine. The Dolynska-Mykolaiv-Kolosivka railway that leads to Ukrainian ports will be electrified by 2023. At the same time, the Ukrainian government together with the International Finance Corporation prepares the country's seven railway stations for concession (Ukrinform, 28.09.2020).

Society and Culture

- The UN Office of Counter-Terrorism in cooperation with the UN Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia organized an online event on "Central Asian Experience with Individuals Returned from Syria and Iraq: Successes, Challenges, and Lessons Learned" at the 75th session of the UN General Assembly. The aim of the event was to highlight experiences of the Central Asian states in repatriating their nationals, in particular women and children, from camps in north-eastern Syria and Iraq (UzA, 28.09.2020).
- The Embassy of Kazakhstan in Afghanistan rendered humanitarian aid to residents of the Kabul province affected by floods. Food baskets, including flour, pasta, sunflower oil and condensed milk, were donated to more than 5,000 families in need. In addition to Kabul, Kazakhstan's humanitarian cargo was distributed in the Balkh, Parwan, Panjshir, Logar, Wardak, Baghlan and Samangan provinces (MFA of Kazakhstan, 29.09.2020).
- The Mukhtar Auevov Institute of Literature and Art organized an international scientific and theoretical online conference titled "The Golden Horde Civilization: Literary Heritage and Continuity of Traditions". The event, organized as part of the celebration of the 750th anniversary of the Golden Horde, was devoted to its role in mankind history, literature and culture. Participants also discussed the issues of preservation of literary relics and spiritual heritage of Turkic peoples, including written monuments of the Golden Horde (Kazinform, 30.09.2020).
- Tajikistan launched a population and housing census campaign that will run until October 15, 2020. About 30,000 people throughout the country will help to conduct the census that will be carried out via traditional household surveys and Internet. The data will be processed from December 2020 to August 2021, and the final report will be made public in September 2021. The previous census in Tajikistan was conducted in 2010 (Avesta.tj, 01.10.2020).
- Foreign Minister of Turkmenistan Rashid Meredov held a videoconference meeting with UNESCO Director General Audrey Azoulay to discuss issues of preserving the country's intangible cultural and historical heritage and expanding the legal framework for cooperation. Turkmenistan expressed its interest in joining relevant UNESCO conventions and nominating its candidacy for UNESCO structures, as well as in joining the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, which is designed to further strengthen intercultural dialogue (MFA of Turkmenistan, 30.09.2020).
- The U.S. Agency for International Development launched a new program for Central Asia called Regional Water and Vulnerable Environment. The five-year program worth \$24.5 million is aimed at strengthening regional cooperation on shared water resources and addressing environmental challenges in the five Central Asian states. It will address critical water, energy, and agriculture sector linkages, as well as climate change vulnerabilities (US Embassy in Kazakhstan, 01.10.2020).