

Chasing the Stars: Balancing Global University Rankings and Public Accountability in Malaysia

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Abstract

This study examines the conflict between Malaysia's ambition to achieve high international university rankings, often seen as "chasing the stars" and the basic duty of public universities to remain accountable to society. Under the influence of market-driven management practices, Malaysian universities increasingly focus on performance metrics, global visibility, and prestige. Using a systematic review of existing literature, this paper examines three interconnected themes: the emergence of world-class universities and global ranking systems, the influence of New Public Management on higher education governance, and the concept of public accountability within universities. Together, these perspectives provide the theoretical foundation for analysing the tensions and challenges associated with Malaysia's pursuit of world-class university status. The findings show that while local evaluation systems like SETARA and MyRA boost research productivity, their heavy focus on measurable numbers harms teaching quality, social inclusion, and public value. By comparing Malaysia's situation with Singapore's workforce-focused SkillsFuture initiative, this study suggests reforming Malaysian higher education policies. It recommends shifting from purely numbers-driven targets toward a balanced system that measures public and societal value. Ultimately, the study argues that global recognition should not be the final goal; true university excellence must be judged by an institution's ability to build public trust, support student growth, and contribute meaningfully to national development.

Keywords: University rankings, higher education, New Public Management, public accountability

INTRODUCTION

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In today's globalised and knowledge-driven era, higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly recognised as strategic drivers of economic competitiveness, innovation, social mobility, and national development. Universities are no longer viewed solely as centres of teaching and learning but also as institutions responsible for generating knowledge, enhancing human capital, and strengthening a nation's global standing (Altbach, 2013; Marginson, 2017). In this context, international university rankings such as Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) and Times Higher Education (THE) have emerged as influential benchmarks for measuring institutional performance and global prestige. These ranking systems significantly influence student mobility, academic recruitment, international collaboration, research funding, and governmental policy priorities (Hazelkorn, 2015; Al-Rubeai, 2023). Consequently, achieving higher

rankings is frequently interpreted as evidence of academic excellence and international recognition.

However, for developing countries such as Malaysia, the pursuit of world-class university status presents significant structural and policy challenges. Global ranking systems primarily prioritise research productivity, citation impact, internationalisation, and institutional reputation, criteria that tend to favour well-established and resource-rich universities in Western countries and selected elite Asian institutions (Lo, 2014a; Salmi, 2009). As a result, Malaysian universities face increasing pressure to compete globally while simultaneously fulfilling their broader public responsibilities, including ensuring equitable access to education, maintaining teaching quality, promoting graduate employability, and contributing to national development agendas. This creates a governance dilemma in which universities are expected to balance global competitiveness with local societal obligations.

The growing emphasis on rankings is closely associated with governance reforms influenced by New Public Management (NPM). Since the late twentieth century, NPM reforms have encouraged public sector institutions, including universities, to adopt market-oriented and corporate-style management practices centred on efficiency, accountability, competition, and measurable performance outcomes (Hood, 1991; Dunleavy & Hood, 1994). Within higher education, these reforms have institutionalised the use of key performance indicators (KPIs), publication targets, international collaborations, and graduate employability metrics as indicators of institutional success (Bleiklie, 2018; Rust, 2012). In Malaysia, NPM-inspired reforms have transformed universities into increasingly competitive entities that operate according to market logic, where rankings function as proxies for institutional quality and legitimacy (Naidoo, 2018a). Consequently, universities are encouraged to prioritise measurable outputs that improve global visibility and prestige.

Nevertheless, universities differ fundamentally from private corporations because they remain public institutions financed substantially through public resources and entrusted with broader societal responsibilities. Excessive dependence on ranking metrics risks narrowing the mission of universities by privileging external validation over public accountability and social responsibility. As Jie (2016) argues, the legitimacy of higher education institutions should not solely depend on international recognition but also on their accountability to students, families, communities, and society at large.

This paradox is particularly evident in Malaysia, where public universities are expected not only to compete internationally but also to function as instruments of social mobility, nation-building, and human capital development.

Recognising these tensions, the Malaysian government has introduced several policy initiatives aimed at strengthening both competitiveness and accountability within higher education. The Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015–2025, together with evaluation frameworks such as SETARA and MyRA, reflects the government's ambition to position Malaysian universities more competitively at the global level while enhancing institutional accountability and governance performance (Ministry of Higher Education, 2015). Although these frameworks have contributed positively to research productivity, institutional benchmarking, and international collaboration, critics argue that they may also reinforce excessive reliance on quantifiable indicators at the expense of teaching quality, inclusivity, student wellbeing, and community engagement (Da Wan et al., 2018; Hazelkorn, 2015). If left unbalanced, this performance-driven culture may intensify inequalities between institutions, encourage the commodification of higher education, and weaken universities' responsiveness to societal needs (UNICEF Malaysia, 2020; Lo, 2014b; Naidoo, 2018a).

Against this backdrop, this study critically examines the tension between Malaysia's pursuit of higher international university rankings and the responsibility of public universities to uphold public accountability. Specifically, the study identifies three interconnected challenges: intensifying global competition within higher education, narrow and metric-driven definitions of institutional prestige, and the growing monetisation of education that risks marginalising equity and inclusivity. In addition, the study explores alternative policy approaches, including comparative lessons from Singapore's SkillsFuture initiative, to evaluate how higher education systems can balance global aspirations with societal obligations. Ultimately, this study argues that while international recognition and competitiveness remain important, genuine university excellence should be assessed not only through global rankings but also through universities' ability to promote inclusivity, public trust, graduate resilience, and meaningful contributions to national and societal development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The pursuit of world-class university status has become a prominent policy objective in higher education systems worldwide. Driven by globalization, knowledge-based economic competition, and the growing influence of international ranking systems, universities are increasingly expected to demonstrate excellence through measurable indicators such as research productivity, international visibility, and institutional reputation (Altbach, 2013; Hazelkorn, 2015). In many countries, including Malaysia, these developments have encouraged universities to adopt performance-oriented strategies aimed at enhancing global competitiveness and international recognition.

The growing emphasis on rankings and institutional performance is closely linked to the influence of New Public Management (NPM), which promotes efficiency, accountability, benchmarking, and results-based governance within public sector institutions (Hood, 1991; Dunleavy & Hood, 1994). While these reforms have contributed to improvements in university performance and international standing, scholars have questioned whether the pursuit of ranking success may inadvertently shift universities away from their broader public responsibilities (Bleiklie, 2018; Naidoo, 2018b). Concerns have emerged regarding the extent to which ranking-driven policies prioritize measurable outputs over educational quality, social inclusion, community engagement, and national development objectives.

Within the Malaysian context, higher education reforms have increasingly emphasized internationalization, research excellence, and global competitiveness as reflected in national policy initiatives and institutional performance frameworks. However, the growing focus on achieving world-class university status has also generated debates regarding public accountability and the role of universities as publicly funded institutions. Despite extensive scholarship on university rankings and higher education reforms, limited attention has been given to understanding how Malaysia's pursuit of international recognition may affect the balance between global competitiveness and public accountability.

Therefore, this literature review examines three interconnected themes: the emergence of world-class universities and global ranking systems, the influence of New Public Management on higher education governance, and the concept of public accountability within universities. Together, these perspectives provide the theoretical foundation for analysing the tensions and challenges associated with Malaysia's pursuit of world-class university status.

World-Class Universities and the Global Ranking Movement

The concept of the world-class university has become a dominant aspiration among higher education institutions worldwide. According to Salmi (2009), world-class universities are typically characterized by excellence in research, high-quality teaching, international visibility, and strong governance structures. As globalization intensifies competition among universities, governments increasingly view higher education as a strategic tool for enhancing national competitiveness and economic development. Consequently, international ranking systems such as QS World University Rankings and Times Higher Education Rankings have become influential benchmarks for measuring institutional success.

The growing importance of rankings has significantly reshaped higher education systems across the world. Hazelkorn (2015) argues that rankings influence institutional priorities, government policies, resource allocation, and university strategies. Universities often adjust their policies to improve research output, publication performance, internationalization, and reputation indicators that are heavily weighted within ranking methodologies. Similarly, Marginson (2017) observes that rankings have created a global competition for prestige in which universities increasingly compare themselves against international standards rather than local societal needs.

While rankings provide visibility and international recognition, scholars have raised concerns regarding their limitations. Altbach (2013) notes that global ranking systems are largely based on research-intensive models developed in Western contexts and may not adequately reflect the diverse missions of universities in developing countries. Lo (2014) further argues that ranking systems encourage institutional convergence, leading universities to imitate elite global models regardless of local contexts. As a result, universities may prioritize activities that improve ranking

performance while neglecting responsibilities related to equity, social inclusion, and community engagement.

Critics also contend that the pursuit of ranking success can distort institutional priorities. Naidoo (2018) describes this phenomenon as the "competition fetish," whereby universities become excessively focused on measurable indicators and market-oriented competition. Such developments risk transforming higher education from a public good into a competitive marketplace driven by reputation and performance metrics. Consequently, questions have emerged regarding whether ranking success genuinely reflects educational quality or simply institutional prestige (Al-Rubeai, 2023).

New Public Management and Higher Education Reform

The expansion of ranking-oriented governance in higher education is closely associated with the emergence of New Public Management (NPM). NPM refers to a set of administrative reforms that seek to improve public sector efficiency through performance measurement, competition, managerial autonomy, and results-based management (Hood, 1991; Dunleavy & Hood, 1994). Originally developed within public administration, NPM principles have increasingly influenced higher education governance across many countries.

Within universities, NPM promotes the adoption of managerial practices commonly associated with the private sector, including performance indicators, strategic planning, benchmarking, and accountability mechanisms (Rust, 2012). According to Bleiklie (2018), these reforms have transformed universities from collegial academic institutions into organizations increasingly governed by managerial and performance-driven principles. Institutional success is frequently assessed through quantifiable outputs such as publication counts, citation indexes, research grants, and international rankings.

The influence of NPM is particularly evident in higher education systems seeking global competitiveness. Slaughter and Leslie (1997) describe this process as academic capitalism, whereby universities become increasingly responsive to market pressures and external performance incentives. Similarly, Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) argue that market-oriented reforms encourage universities to prioritize revenue

generation, reputation building, and strategic positioning within global higher education markets.

In the Malaysian context, NPM principles have shaped major higher education reforms over the past two decades. Policies such as the Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015–2025 emphasize institutional performance, internationalization, research excellence, and global recognition. National evaluation instruments such as SETARA and MyRA further reinforce performance measurement and benchmarking practices. While these reforms have enhanced institutional competitiveness, scholars argue that they may also encourage managerialism and excessive reliance on performance indicators (Da Wan et al., 2018; Mok, 2010).

Public Accountability and Public Value in Higher Education

Public accountability remains a fundamental principle of higher education governance, particularly for publicly funded universities. Accountability refers to the obligation of institutions to justify their actions, demonstrate responsible use of public resources, and serve the interests of society (Behn, 2001). Traditionally, universities have been accountable not only for academic performance but also for promoting social mobility, nation-building, and public welfare.

However, the increasing emphasis on rankings and performance measurement has altered the nature of accountability within higher education. Under NPM frameworks, accountability is often assessed through measurable outputs and performance indicators rather than broader societal contributions (Bleiklie, 1998). This shift may create tensions between institutional performance objectives and public responsibilities. Marginson (2011) argues that universities generate significant public benefits through knowledge creation, civic engagement, and human capital development, functions that are not always captured by ranking metrics.

In Malaysia, public universities occupy a unique position as state-funded institutions responsible for supporting national development goals. Beyond producing research outputs, universities are expected to contribute to social inclusion, graduate employability, community development, and equitable access to education. UNICEF Malaysia (2020) highlights persistent inequalities in educational opportunities, suggesting that higher education institutions continue to play a crucial role in addressing

social disparities. Similarly, Faruqi (2021) emphasizes the broader constitutional and societal responsibilities of public institutions in supporting national wellbeing and social justice.

The concept of public value provides a useful framework for understanding these responsibilities. Public value theory suggests that public institutions should be evaluated according to their contribution to societal outcomes rather than solely through organizational performance indicators. Applied to higher education, this perspective encourages universities to balance research excellence and global competitiveness with their obligations to students, communities, and society. Consequently, public accountability extends beyond rankings and publication metrics to include educational quality, inclusivity, accessibility, and social impact.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of this study, which is grounded in the principles of New Public Management (NPM). The framework illustrates how NPM reforms influence governance practices in higher education through four interrelated dimensions, namely Results-Based Accountability (RBA), Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), outputs, and outcomes. These dimensions collectively shape institutional behaviour, performance measurement, and accountability mechanisms within Malaysian public universities.

The emergence of New Public Management (NPM) can be traced to broader transformations in public administration following the Second World War. During this period, traditional bureaucratic approaches were increasingly criticised for being overly rigid, inefficient, and disconnected from practical organisational realities. One of the most influential scholars in this intellectual shift was Herbert Simon, whose seminal work *Administrative Behavior* challenged the classical assumption that administrative principles represented objective scientific truths (Simon, 1947). Simon argued that many traditional administrative principles were merely inconsistent “proverbs” lacking empirical validity. Instead, he proposed that public administration should be grounded in systematic scientific inquiry, rational decision-making, and observable human behaviour.

Simon's contributions significantly transformed the study of public administration by introducing behaviouralism and decision-making theory into administrative analysis. His work laid the intellectual foundation for the development of neoclassical public administration, which incorporated systems theory, structural functionalism, welfare economics, and analytical decision-making approaches (Stillman, 1991). More importantly, Simon's emphasis on rationality, efficiency, and measurable performance later influenced the emergence of New Public Management (NPM), particularly in the late twentieth century.

NPM emerged prominently during the 1980s and 1990s as governments across many countries sought to reform public sector institutions by adopting private-sector management practices focused on efficiency, competition, accountability, and performance measurement (Hood, 1991; Dunleavy & Hood, 1994). Under NPM, public institutions were encouraged to operate according to market-oriented principles, where success is evaluated through measurable indicators and results-oriented governance. In higher education, these reforms reshaped universities into increasingly competitive institutions driven by performance metrics, global rankings, and institutional benchmarking (Bleiklie, 2018). Simon's contributions significantly transformed the study of public administration by introducing behaviouralism and decision-making theory into administrative analysis. His work laid the intellectual foundation for the development of neoclassical public administration, which incorporated systems theory, structural functionalism, welfare economics, and analytical decision-making approaches (Stillman, 1991). More importantly, Simon's emphasis on rationality, efficiency, and measurable performance later influenced the emergence of New Public Management (NPM), particularly in the late twentieth century. NPM emerged prominently during the 1980s and 1990s as governments across many countries sought to reform public sector institutions by adopting private-sector management practices focused on efficiency, competition, accountability, and performance measurement (Hood, 1991; Dunleavy & Hood, 1994). Under NPM, public institutions were encouraged to operate according to market-oriented principles, where success is evaluated through measurable indicators and results-oriented governance. In higher education, these reforms reshaped universities into increasingly competitive institutions driven by performance metrics, global rankings, and institutional benchmarking (Bleiklie, 2018).

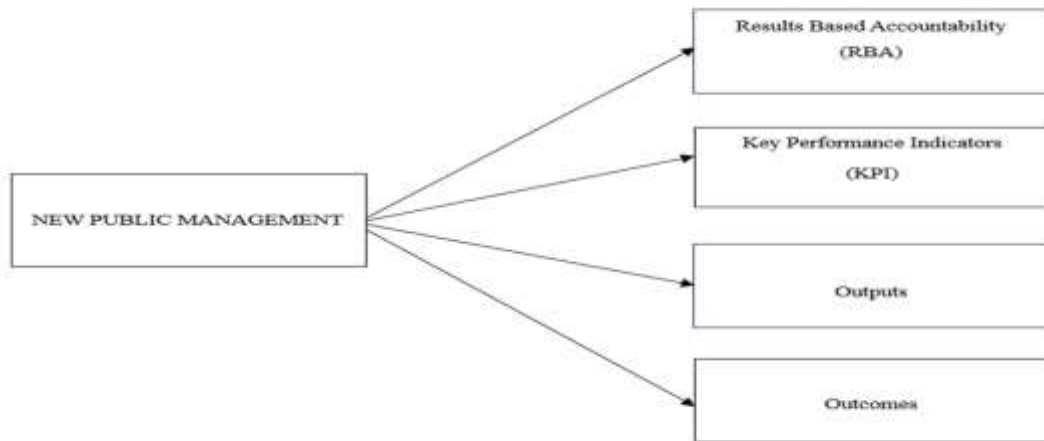


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of New Public Management in Higher Education Governance

Sources: Bleiklie, 2018; Dunleavy & Hood, 1994; Hood, 1991

As illustrated in Figure 1, the conceptual framework identifies four central components of NPM relevant to this study. The first component is Results-Based Accountability (RBA), which emphasises institutional responsibility for achieving measurable goals and demonstrating tangible performance outcomes. RBA shifts organisational focus from administrative processes toward evidence-based results and institutional effectiveness (Behn, 2001). The second component involves Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), which function as quantitative measures used to evaluate institutional success. In higher education, KPIs commonly include publication outputs, citation indexes, graduate employability rates, research grants, and international collaborations. These indicators have become central mechanisms through which universities assess competitiveness and global visibility (Hazelkorn, 2015). The third component, outputs, refers to immediate measurable achievements produced by universities, such as the number of publications, patents, research activities, or international partnerships. Meanwhile, the fourth component, outcomes, refers to broader long-term societal impacts, including graduate development, social mobility, public trust, innovation capacity, and national development contributions.

This conceptual framework is particularly relevant to the Malaysian higher education context because contemporary university governance increasingly reflects NPM principles through policy instruments such as SETARA, MyRA, and the Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015–2025. These frameworks institutionalise performance-based governance by prioritising measurable indicators associated with global competitiveness and international rankings (Ministry of Higher Education, 2015). However, excessive reliance on outputs and KPIs may risk marginalising broader educational responsibilities, particularly inclusivity, teaching quality, and societal accountability. Therefore, this study uses the NPM framework to critically examine how ranking-oriented governance influences the balance between global competitiveness and public accountability in Malaysian universities.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) combined with thematic analysis as the core research design. This methodological approach was selected to systematically synthesise and critically evaluate diverse sources of literature related to international university rankings and public accountability within Malaysia's higher education sector. The study draws upon a wide range of secondary sources, including scholarly publications, policy documents, institutional reports, and public discourse concerning higher education governance and reform.

Unlike studies that rely on primary empirical methods such as surveys or interviews, this research employs a secondary data approach to obtain broader analytical perspectives on the evolving dynamics of higher education policy and governance. The use of published academic literature, official policy frameworks, and elite discourse from policymakers and institutional stakeholders provides a strong foundation for understanding the complexities surrounding Malaysia's pursuit of global university recognition. Furthermore, this approach enables the study to critically examine how international ranking ambitions influence governance priorities, accountability practices, and institutional behaviour within Malaysian public universities.

Rationale for Systematic Review

The use of a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) is appropriate for this study because it enables the researcher to systematically synthesise, evaluate, and integrate extensive and fragmented literature across multiple academic disciplines. According to Amado Mateus and Juarez Acosta (2022), systematic reviews are particularly valuable in consolidating theoretical perspectives and empirical findings from diverse fields of study. In the context of this research, debates surrounding world-class universities (WCU), international university rankings, and public accountability extend beyond higher education studies and intersect with public administration, political economy, governance, and international development.

Within the Malaysian context, discussions concerning governance reforms, institutional accountability, legitimacy, and social equity are closely connected to broader public sector transformation agendas influenced by New Public Management (NPM). As universities increasingly operate within performance-oriented governance systems, understanding these interconnected issues requires a comprehensive and multidisciplinary analytical approach. Therefore, the adoption of an SLR allows this study to critically examine how global ranking ambitions influence higher education governance and accountability practices in Malaysia.

Furthermore, systematic reviews enhance methodological rigour by ensuring transparency, consistency, and reliability in the process of identifying, selecting, and analysing relevant literature. As highlighted by Muka et al. (2020), consolidating evidence from diverse scholarly and policy sources strengthens the accuracy and credibility of research findings, particularly when addressing complex and evolving policy issues. Consequently, the SLR approach provides a robust foundation for analysing the tensions between international competitiveness and public accountability within Malaysian higher education institutions.

Scope and Sources of Data

The review covers literature published between 1997 and 2025. This period demonstrated Malaysia's increasing initiatives for global university recognition in accordance with the Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015 - 2025.

The final collection consists of secondary sources, which includes:

- (a) Peer reviewed journal articles from databases such as Google Scholar, Taylor & Francis Online, Emerald Insight, and ScienceDirect.
- (b) Documents and reports pertaining to policy, including the Malaysia Education Blueprint, communications from the Ministry of Higher Education, and comparative international reports from organisations such as OECD and UNESCO.
- (c) Statements and formal remarks from officials in higher education, university representatives, and political figures. These were gathered from media outlets, digital news archives, and online platforms like YouTube. Despite the absence of peer review, speeches are considered secondary qualitative sources as they highlight the framing of higher education priorities, the reasons for policy changes, and the viewpoints of elites regarding accountability.

By employing diverse resources acknowledges that discussions around higher education go beyond scholarly settings into public and policy spheres. This approach improves the analysis by combining scholarly viewpoints with practical approach.

Search Strategy and Inclusion Criteria

Methodological keywords utilized include “*university rankings*”, “*higher education policy*”, “*public accountability*”, “*Malaysia*”, “*graduate employability*”, and “*New Public Management or NPM*”. Sources were incorporated if they:

- (a) Released between 1997–2025;
- (b) Focused on the reforms in higher education reforms, accountability, or international rankings;
- (c) Geographical concentrated on Malaysia or provided relevant comparative insights;
- (d) Available in English or Malay.

Sources were omitted if they were merely descriptive (e.g., news articles lacking analysis) or if their emphasis deviated from the study’s primary theme.

Analytical Framework: Thematic Analysis

According to Braun and Clarke’s framework, the thematic analysis framework is utilised in identifying patterns, tensions and any discrepancy on the selected texts (Maguire & Delahunt, 2014) . Hence, the process requires 6 steps which involved;

- (a) Familiarisation – immersive reading and understanding the dataset in depth.
- (b) Coding – flag and label important keywords in assigning descriptive and interpretive codes such as *competitive pressures*, *metrics-driven prestige*, *employability discourses*, *accountability frameworks*, and *equity challenges*.
- (c) Theme development – clustering related codes into three overarching themes:
 - Competitive pressures of the global education market;
 - Metric-centric definitions of prestige and reputation;
 - Monetisation of higher education and its implications for equity and social mobility.
- (d) Reviewing themes – refining and ensuring the theme in adapting coherence and systematicness.
- (e) Establishing themes – labelling themes for the sake of understanding the narrative of each theme.
- (f) Synthesis and interpretation – produce a thorough and convincing analysis report that connects the themes to the research questions and theoretical frameworks, particularly NPM and public accountability theory, which guided the overall analysis.

This framework guaranteed that the results were not just recaps of previous studies but a combined insight that highlighted the interaction between international goals and local necessities.

Validity and Reliability

In mastering validity and reliability in academic research, Kouam Arthur William (2024) concluded such steps in enhancing both;

- (a) Validity – Triangulation by using multiple resources and methods in endorsing findings in compliance with policy narratives and discourses on academic debates.
- (b) Reliability – Standardisation of procedures and consistency of research findings in accordance with bias free data collection.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The study addresses three research questions (RQs) as the framework for structuring the findings. As a whole, these research questions show how Malaysia's pursuit of international university ranking creates conflict with the idea of public accountability. Using thematic analysis and supported by various scholars, decision-makers, and practitioners, this section will highlight dilemmas in the Malaysian higher education system.

The Influence of International University Rankings on Institutional Priorities in Malaysian Public Universities

The first findings indicate that international university rankings have significantly redefined the meaning of institutional success within Malaysia's higher education system. Increasingly, Malaysian public universities align their strategic priorities with the performance indicators employed by global ranking agencies such as Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) and Times Higher Education (THE). As a result, institutional success is frequently measured through research productivity, citation impact, internationalisation, and graduate employability rather than broader educational and societal contributions (Hazelkorn, 2015; Marginson, 2017). This transformation reflects the broader influence of New Public Management (NPM), which promotes measurable performance, competition, and efficiency within public sector institutions.

The findings further reveal that ranking-oriented governance has encouraged Malaysian universities to prioritise research output, particularly publications in indexed and high-impact journals. Public universities such as Universiti Malaya (UM) have introduced extensive research incentives, publication rewards, and international collaboration initiatives to improve global ranking performance. These strategies have contributed positively to the international visibility of Malaysian universities, with UM consistently improving its position within global rankings. However, critics argue that the excessive focus on publication metrics has shifted institutional priorities away from teaching quality, student-centred learning, and community engagement (Naidoo, 2018a; Altbach, 2013). In this context, academic performance is increasingly assessed through quantifiable indicators such as h-indexes, citation counts, and impact factors, reinforcing what scholars describe as a "KPI culture" within higher education governance.

The influence of rankings has also reshaped institutional resource allocation. Universities increasingly invest in activities that directly enhance ranking performance, including recruiting international faculty, increasing international student enrolment, expanding research infrastructure, and strengthening global partnerships. While these initiatives improve global competitiveness, they may also divert institutional attention and resources away from local developmental priorities and social responsibilities. This supports Naidoo's (2018b) argument that universities operating within competitive ranking systems increasingly resemble market-oriented organisations rather than public-serving institutions.

Besides, the findings additionally suggest that ranking-oriented reforms produce important cultural and organisational consequences within universities. Academic staff are increasingly pressured to meet publication targets and performance metrics, contributing to intensified managerialism and performance-driven work cultures. Such developments reflect the penetration of NPM principles into higher education, where institutional legitimacy becomes dependent on measurable outputs rather than broader educational outcomes. Consequently, universities may experience tension between fulfilling global competitiveness agendas and maintaining their traditional public missions centred on teaching excellence, equity, and societal contribution.

A comparative perspective with Singapore further strengthens this analysis. Similar to Malaysia, Singaporean universities such as the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU) have actively pursued global ranking excellence and achieved significant international recognition. However, Singapore's higher education model demonstrates a more balanced integration between global competitiveness and national workforce development through initiatives such as SkillsFuture. Unlike ranking-centred approaches that primarily reward publication metrics, SkillsFuture emphasises lifelong learning, graduate adaptability, industry relevance, and workforce competency development (Kwek & Wong, 2023; Singapore Ministry of Education, 2023). This reflects a broader policy orientation where higher education is aligned not only with international prestige but also with national economic and societal needs.

In contrast, the Malaysian higher education system remains comparatively more dependent on ranking indicators as proxies for institutional quality and legitimacy. Although frameworks such as SETARA and MyRA aim to strengthen accountability and competitiveness, they continue to prioritise measurable outputs such as publications, citations, and graduate employability rates. The Singaporean experience therefore highlights the importance of balancing ranking aspirations with broader societal outcomes, particularly in ensuring that universities remain responsive to public needs and national development priorities.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that international rankings strongly influence the institutional priorities of Malaysian public universities. While rankings enhance global visibility, legitimacy, and international competitiveness, they also encourage resource concentration toward measurable research outputs and internationalisation strategies, often at the expense of teaching quality, inclusivity, community engagement, and public accountability. The evidence suggests that Malaysian universities are increasingly operating within a competitive corporate logic shaped by NPM, creating tension between global prestige and their broader responsibilities as public institutions.

International Recognition and Its Implications for Public Accountability in Malaysian Universities

The second research question examines how the pursuit of international recognition reshapes the accountability obligations of Malaysian public universities toward their primary stakeholders, particularly students, taxpayers, and society. The findings suggest that global ranking ambitions increasingly influence institutional priorities and governance practices, resulting in a gradual shift in accountability away from local societal needs toward externally defined performance benchmarks. This reflects a broader transformation under New Public Management (NPM), where institutional legitimacy is increasingly measured through measurable outputs and international visibility rather than public service and social responsibility. Traditionally, Malaysian public universities have been entrusted with broader national responsibilities, including promoting social mobility, expanding equitable access to higher education, producing skilled graduates, and contributing to national development agendas. As publicly funded institutions, universities are expected to remain accountable to the Malaysian public by ensuring educational inclusivity, quality teaching, and societal relevance. However, the findings indicate that this accountability relationship has

become increasingly complicated as universities prioritise international ranking performance as a symbol of institutional success and global legitimacy (Jie, 2016).

The emergence of what scholars describe as a “two-tier university system” further illustrates the unequal consequences of ranking-oriented reforms. Funding, prestige, research opportunities, and institutional attention tend to be concentrated within a small number of flagship universities with stronger global ranking potential, particularly institutions such as Universiti Malaya (UM). Meanwhile, smaller public universities may struggle to compete within ranking frameworks due to differences in financial capacity, research infrastructure, and international networks. Civil society groups such as Aliran (2025) argue that such inequalities risk undermining national cohesion by privileging elite global competitiveness over inclusive educational development. Consequently, accountability becomes unevenly distributed across the higher education system.

A comparison with Singapore provides important insights into alternative approaches to balancing international recognition with public accountability. Singaporean universities such as the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU) are globally recognised institutions that consistently perform strongly in international rankings. However, Singapore’s higher education governance model demonstrates stronger integration between global excellence and societal relevance through initiatives such as SkillsFuture, which prioritises lifelong learning, workforce adaptability, skills development, and graduate employability (Kwek & Wong, 2023; Singapore Ministry of Education, 2023). Rather than focusing exclusively on publication metrics and rankings, Singapore’s policies place greater emphasis on aligning higher education outcomes with national economic and societal needs.

In contrast, the Malaysian higher education system remains comparatively dependent on rankings as proxies for institutional quality and legitimacy. Although frameworks such as SETARA and MyRA aim to strengthen accountability and competitiveness, they continue to prioritise measurable outputs that are closely associated with global ranking methodologies. This creates tension between international prestige and local responsibilities, particularly regarding inclusivity, teaching quality, and community engagement. The comparison with Singapore therefore highlights the importance of adopting a more balanced accountability

framework that evaluates universities not only through global visibility but also through their contributions to social development and public wellbeing.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the pursuit of international recognition has significantly reshaped the accountability structure of Malaysian public universities. While international rankings provide legitimacy, prestige, and global competitiveness, they may also encourage universities to prioritise external performance indicators over their broader public responsibilities. The findings suggest that accountability is increasingly being redirected upward toward global ranking agencies and policy performance systems rather than downward toward students, communities, and the Malaysian public. Consequently, achieving a sustainable balance between global competitiveness and public accountability remains a critical challenge for Malaysian higher education governance.

Political Governance and the Tensions between Global Ranking Aspirations and Public Accountability in Higher Education

The third research question examines how political processes and national governance structures intensify the tensions between universities' pursuit of international rankings and their obligations toward public accountability. The findings demonstrate that rankings in Malaysia are not merely academic benchmarks, but political instruments of legitimacy embedded within governance systems that simultaneously empower and constrain universities. Ranking achievements are frequently framed as evidence of governmental effectiveness, modernization, and global competitiveness, transforming universities into vehicles through which the state projects international prestige and political credibility.

An administrator remarked, "*We were told that UM breaking into the top 100 would be a political victory,*" illustrating how rankings have transcended academic significance and entered the realm of political symbolism. This finding supports Case's (2002) argument that in hybrid political systems, external recognition often substitutes for domestic legitimacy. In Malaysia, ranking performance therefore becomes both a university KPI and a state KPI, linking institutional success directly to governmental legitimacy. A similar dynamic is visible in Singapore, where the international success of National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University is consistently incorporated into national narratives of economic competitiveness, technological

advancement, and meritocratic governance (Mok, 2010). In both countries, rankings function not only as measures of academic quality but also as symbols of national achievement and political credibility.

The politicization of rankings fundamentally reshapes university priorities by privileging globally visible and politically marketable indicators such as research productivity, citation impact, internationalization, and institutional reputation. Governments favor these indicators because they provide quantifiable evidence of progress that can be showcased internationally. However, the emphasis on measurable global visibility often marginalizes less quantifiable but socially significant responsibilities such as community engagement, local knowledge production, regional development, and social inclusion. In Malaysia, universities increasingly struggle to reconcile ranking ambitions with their historical nation-building responsibilities, particularly regarding equitable access and societal development. Similarly, while Singapore has achieved remarkable global competitiveness, scholars argue that its universities have become increasingly corporatized and managerial, prioritizing economically productive research and innovation over broader civic functions (Marginson, 2011). Consequently, the pursuit of world-class status risks narrowing the meaning of university success to internationally measurable outputs rather than contributions to society. This reflects what Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) describe as “academic capitalism,” whereby universities increasingly align themselves with market-oriented and globally competitive agendas at the expense of traditional public-service roles.

At the governance level, Malaysian public universities operate within a system of “circumscribed autonomy,” where institutions are encouraged to compete globally while remaining under strong state oversight. Leadership appointments, strategic planning, and policy directions remain closely connected to ministerial influence, creating a structural contradiction in which universities are expected to behave as globally autonomous institutions while remaining politically compliant. This produces an institutional “double bind”: universities must conform simultaneously to global ranking logics and domestic political expectations. The adoption of New Public Management (NPM) further intensifies this tension through KPI regimes, audits, and performance-based governance mechanisms that expand state surveillance under the language of efficiency and accountability (Bleiklie, 1998). Singapore presents a contrasting but complementary model. Although Singaporean universities enjoy greater

managerial autonomy and policy stability, they remain strategically aligned with state developmental priorities through centralized planning, targeted funding, and performance-based evaluation systems (Mok, 2015). Thus, while Singapore demonstrates a more coordinated governance model, universities in both contexts ultimately remain embedded within broader state agendas rather than functioning as fully independent institutions.

Taken together, the findings across all three research questions reveal a central paradox underpinning higher education transformation in Malaysia and Singapore. The pursuit of world-class university status undoubtedly enhances international visibility and national prestige, yet it also risks weakening universities' accountability to the societies they are intended to serve (Kwek & Wong, 2023; Singapore Ministry of Education, 2023). Rankings have become institutionalized norms that reshape governance priorities, academic behavior, and definitions of success, often shifting accountability upward toward ranking agencies, political elites, and international audiences rather than outward toward local communities and citizens. This reflects a broader misalignment between global aspirations and public obligations within contemporary higher education governance. Although Singapore demonstrates that strategic coordination and sustained state investment can facilitate global success more effectively, even its model does not fully escape tensions between global prestige and societal responsibility. Ultimately, the study argues that international competitiveness should not become an end in itself; rather, global recognition must be balanced with a broader conception of higher education that prioritizes public value, social responsiveness, and national development.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings suggest that Malaysia should reconsider its heavy reliance on international rankings as the primary measure of university success. A more holistic framework should incorporate teaching quality, graduate employability, equity, and societal impact alongside research performance. International rankings often prioritize research productivity and global visibility while overlooking broader social responsibilities. Countries such as Finland and Germany demonstrate that educational excellence can be achieved through equity, accessibility, and public value rather than ranking competition alone (Sahlberg, 2011; Hazelkorn, 2015).

Second, Malaysian universities should strengthen public accountability by demonstrating tangible societal contributions beyond ranking performance. Accountability should include student satisfaction, accessibility, social mobility, and community engagement. Applying public value principles can help universities prioritize meaningful outcomes over measurable outputs. Singapore illustrates how global competitiveness can be combined with national development objectives through research, innovation, and strategic investment, although concerns regarding managerialism and academic pressure remain evident (Mok, 2015; Marginson, 2011).

Third, the findings highlight the need to strengthen policy capacity within Malaysia's higher education system. Analytical capacity should support evidence-based policies aligned with national priorities such as social inclusion and sustainable development, while political capacity should encourage broader stakeholder participation. According to Wu, Ramesh, and Howlett (2015), policy failures often result from imbalances between analytical and political capacity. Countries such as Norway and Denmark demonstrate how participatory governance and public welfare objectives can support educational quality and public trust without excessive emphasis on rankings.

Finally, balancing global aspirations with local responsibilities requires a more strategic and depoliticized approach to university governance. While universities should pursue internationally competitive research, they must also address national challenges such as inequality and sustainability. Greater institutional autonomy and reduced political interference would support long-term planning and academic integrity. As argued by Common (2001), Malaysia's implementation of New Public Management has often reinforced state control rather than accountability. Ultimately, international recognition should complement, rather than replace, universities' commitments to public accountability and national development.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to the existing literature by bridging the discourse on world-class universities with the concept of public accountability within the Malaysian higher education context. While previous studies have often examined international rankings, governance reforms, and accountability as separate areas of inquiry, this research integrates these dimensions through the conceptual framework developed in

this study. By combining Policy Capacity Theory, New Public Management (NPM), and public accountability perspectives, the study demonstrates how global ranking pressures reshape institutional priorities, governance structures, and accountability relationships in public universities. The findings extend Policy Capacity Theory by illustrating that global ranking competition disproportionately strengthens analytical capacity—such as performance measurement, KPI monitoring, and research benchmarking—while simultaneously weakening political capacity related to stakeholder engagement, inclusiveness, and societal responsiveness (Wu, Ramesh, & Howlett, 2015). In addition, the study contributes theoretically by revealing how politicized NPM reforms create a governance paradox in which universities are expected to operate as globally competitive institutions while remaining politically compliant under strong state influence. This highlights the Malaysian experience as a distinctive case of “circumscribed autonomy,” where global competitiveness and public accountability coexist in constant tension.

From a policy perspective, the study provides an important contribution by offering a more balanced framework for evaluating higher education performance beyond international rankings alone. The findings suggest that policymakers should reconsider the dominance of ranking-based indicators and incorporate broader measures of public value, including teaching quality, accessibility, graduate outcomes, social mobility, and community impact. The study also contributes to policy discussions by emphasizing the need for stronger governance reforms that enhance institutional autonomy while simultaneously improving accountability to society rather than solely to political actors or ranking agencies. Comparisons with countries such as Singapore, Finland, and Germany demonstrate that high-quality higher education systems can remain globally respected without relying exclusively on ranking-oriented policies. Therefore, this research offers a policy-relevant framework for Malaysia to pursue international competitiveness while safeguarding the civic and developmental functions of public universities. Ultimately, the study contributes to ongoing debates on higher education governance by arguing that sustainable excellence should be measured not only by global prestige, but also by universities’ ability to generate meaningful public and societal value.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the analysis relies primarily on secondary sources, including academic literature, policy documents, institutional reports, and government publications. While these sources provide valuable insights into policy developments, institutional behaviour, and elite discourses surrounding world-class university initiatives, they do not capture the lived experiences of students, academics, administrators, and communities directly affected by ranking-oriented reforms. As a result, the study may not fully reflect how such policies influence teaching quality, student wellbeing, academic work, and accountability practices within Malaysian universities.

Second, the study focuses predominantly on Malaysian public universities. This focus is justified because public universities operate within government-led governance frameworks, receive substantial public funding, and are closely linked to national performance mechanisms such as the Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015–2025, SETARA, and MyRA. Consequently, issues of public accountability, policy implementation, and national development responsibilities are particularly significant within the public higher education sector. However, this focus limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized to private higher education institutions, which often operate under different governance structures, funding models, and strategic priorities.

Future research could address these limitations by incorporating primary data collection through interviews, surveys, or focus groups involving students, academics, university leaders, and policymakers. Such approaches would provide deeper insights into how ranking pressures shape institutional practices and stakeholder experiences. Longitudinal studies could further examine the long-term implications of global ranking agendas on teaching quality, equity, research priorities, and graduate employability. In addition, comparative research involving public and private universities, as well as higher education systems across ASEAN countries, would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how universities balance global competitiveness with public accountability in different institutional and national contexts.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined Malaysia's pursuit of world-class university status and the tensions that arise between global competitiveness and public accountability. While international rankings have enhanced the visibility and reputation of Malaysian universities, they have also encouraged a narrow focus on performance indicators that may not fully reflect universities' broader social responsibilities. The findings suggest that an excessive emphasis on global recognition risks diverting attention from core public missions, including equitable access, quality teaching, community engagement, and contributions to national development.

The analysis highlights the need for a more balanced approach to higher education governance—one that values international excellence while remaining responsive to local priorities and societal needs. Rather than measuring success solely through global rankings, Malaysian universities should be assessed by their ability to generate meaningful social, economic, and educational outcomes. Ultimately, sustainable excellence in higher education will depend on the capacity of universities to align global aspirations with public value, ensuring that international recognition complements, rather than compromises, their role as institutions serving society and national development.

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