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Evaluation of World University Rankings of Southeast Asia HEIs Image

Muhammad Izharuddin[1], Faizal Susilo Hadi[2], Meirza Cahya Lestyorini[3]

Faculty of Business and Economics, Universitas Surabaya[1,2]
College of Management, National Cheng Kung University[3]

Corresponding Author: Faizal Susilo Hadi (faizalsusilohadi@staff.ubaya.ac.id)

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ABSTRACT

Today's world university rankings have gained prominence in tandem with internationalization endeavors. However, the impact of empirical rankings on the HEI brand image has yet to be thoroughly explored. This research aims to assess the impact of university rankings, based on universal standards and comparable metrics, on brand image at local, national, regional, and international levels. We employed panel data regression analysis to examine 47 HEIs data in Southeast Asia over ten years from SciVal and QS World University. The results shows that HEI rankings affect the brand image of the international media, regional media, national media, and local media. Awards received and mass media in general also got impacted by HEI global ranking. It expands the literature on higher education, providing ranking readings on multi-level reputation articulations. World university rankings can be used as a strategy to increase regional reputation in Southeast Asia as well as internationally. Future research could broaden the scope of regional data and use various types of world university rankings. In addition, other impacts, such as international students, inbound and outbound faculty, joint research, and other international indicators, can be further investigated.

Keywords: Higher Education Institution, South East Asia, Ranking, Brand Image

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INTRODUCTION

Rankings have evolved into a defining characteristic of the higher education environment (Hazelkorn, 2015). Ranking systems assess many markers of higher education, such as the world's best universities, course guides, accreditation, publications, and researchers' h-indices (Berman & Hirschman, 2018). Rankings produce narratives of variety that have extensive implications on academic and student life, campus buildings, government funds, and higher education law. The ranking is a crucial instrument for establishing an institution's reputation, quality image, public trust, and sway (Van Vught, 2008).

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In the last few decades, leading universities in Southeast Asia have been increasingly aggressive in competing in the world (Higher Education Institution) HEI rankings. It is not least because other Southeast Asian HEIs are increasingly competing in the world rankings. Moreover, it would serve as a hub for the global circulation of academics and students, which would contribute to the nation's innovation system. However, many HEIs in Southeast Asia also have obligations within the national scope. Their national brand image remains important in both institutional resources and government budgets. In this respect, world rankings also intersect and sometimes compete with other established image hierarchies. World rankings provide an opportunity to strengthen an institutional position, as well as present other risks associated with negative visibility.

The current world HEI rankings – the majority of which are oriented towards North American and European models – have attracted the attention of researchers in theoretical and empirical terms (Lamont, 2012). Much of the empirical research in the US focuses on how the ranking changes the student choices, administration, organizational behavior of colleges, and university admissions policies (Espeland et al., 2016; Monks & Ehrenberg, 1999). Most of Europe's existing empirical research is descriptive. It pays attention to ranking flaws and what may be done about them, or adopting a critical stance and draw attention to ranking biases and conflicts with the core aim of HEIs (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012; Dill & Soo, 2005; Pusser & Marginson, 2013; Shin et al., 2011; Taylor & Braddock, 2007). Meanwhile, there is no systematic study on how rankings affect the brand image of HEIs in developing countries, in this case, Southeast Asia.

The college represents a form of globalization within the HEI and exemplifies brand image's relationship to national and international ambitions. This study explores the competition for global HEI rankings and the local, national, regional, and international image landscapes of universities in Southeast Asia. In this paper, we synthesize findings from the research on higher education to demonstrating the articulation of local to global images. This paper draws heavily from panel data regression analysis from aggregated institutional-level data of 40 HEIs in Southeast Asia, which were observed longitudinally.

METHODS

We select several HEIs from seven countries in South East Asia (i.e., Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Philippines, Brunei Darussalam) based on Quacquarelli Symonds World University Ranking (QS WUR) officially released in 2022. Specifically, the sample includes 47 higher education institutions. The homogenized sector is considerably more modest and tends to be at the organizational level rather than at the business level, which needs to consider the strategic resource combination across the industry (Sukoco, 2016). These HEIs actively participate in the international ranking, and the data related to their accountable profile is readily available to download from QS's official website at www.topuniversities.com.

Our observation period covers between 2012 to 2022. It yielded 47 HEIs as the sample and 470 data points over ten years of investigation. We decided to select this period firstly because the Asian HEIs who participate in the international ranking are drastically escalating from 2014 to 2015 by about 89.74% so-called Asian HEIs expansion and constantly gradually increasing year-by-year by about 5-8%. Second, the governments among Asian countries, particularly in SEA, initiate programs and increase financial support during this period in order to place their best HEIs in the TOP world-class HEIs in the international ranking (Musselin, 2018). HEIs outside the world 1000 ranking are not included in the sample.

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Table 1. South East Asia Countries of HEI Sample

Region	Country	#HEIs
South East Asia	Brunei	2
	Indonesia	10
	Malaysia	18
	Philippines	4
	Singapore	3
	Thailand	8
	Vietnam	2

Source: authors

Secondary data has been used in this study, retrieved from two credible primary databases. Firstly, QS WUR is a global independent institutional ranker located in the United Kingdom that publishes annual HEI overall/subjects rankings. The second database is SciVal, a global-integrated portfolio issued by Elsevier which provides data access to enhance the research or higher education institutions worldwide. SciVal's metrics collect the data from accountable data sources such as Scopus, NewsFlo, ScimagoJr, PlumX Metrics, and international patent organizations (e.g., WIPO, JPO, EPO, UK IPO, and USPTO). Any supplementary accountable and popular sources, viz HEIs websites, annual reports, magazines, newspapers, and tabloids, are used to clarify the data validity and mitigate ambiguities (Sukoco, 2016).

Ranking

HEI ranking is defined by the degree of HEI's international recognition in the overall industry and is manifested by the global HEI ranking annually published by QS World University Ranking (Hazelkorn, 2016; McMillan & Joshi, 1997; Sukoco et al., 2022). It is measured using annual university ranking performance released by QS WUR (Bekhradnia, 2016; Sukoco et al., 2022). The type of data is continuous.

Brand Image

It is measured by using mass media which refers to the total number of times that media (both online and offline) denoted or referred to the scholars or its scholarly outputs of the opted HEIs (Bowers & Prato, 2019). SciVal provides brand image data. The type of data is continuous. HEI brand image is defined by the degree of the HEIs awareness to act (or respond), which is manifested by the total number of times that the media (offline and online) referred to scholars' output of the selected HEIs (Bowers & Prato, 2019; Chen & Miller, 2012).

Control Variables

To limit the influence of the extraneous factors and confounding effects in this research, we enhance the internal validity by employing organizational status (i.e., public vs. private) and geographic (i.e., country of origin) as the control variables. Organizational status (public vs. private) is considered that HEIs have invested and committed in resources and processes for a relatively long time to gain funding, infrastructure access, and image as a competitive advantage (Mao et al., 2016). Meanwhile, in organizational status, we coded 0 for public HEIs as the baseline because the number of public HEIs ranked in QS WUR is relatively higher than private HEIs.

Another consideration is geography which posits HEIs from their country of origin. HEIs from the same country tend to collaborate and develop their image on each other because of the similar experience and institutional pressures rather than toward other HEIs from different countries (Sharapov & Ross, 2023). In this research, we coded 0 for Malaysia as the baseline since its number of HEIs is greater than the other countries.

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Research Model

This study uses many research models. Various proxies are used to measure brand image. The first proxy of brand image comes from mass media exposure. The second proxy of brand image comes from international media exposure. The third proxy of brand image comes from regional media exposure, the coverage, in this case, being Southeast Asia. The fourth proxy of brand image comes from national media exposure; the coverage, in this case, is for each country. The last proxy of brand image is local media exposure, where the HEI is located.

This study uses panel data regression analysis, which has the characteristics of cross-section and time series data. The cross-sectional nature of the data is shown by the data consisting of more than one individual entity. In contrast, the multi-period time observations show the nature of the time series. Panel data regression is used because the research objective wants an analysis of the effect of differences in entities and or periods. This study uses panel data regression to see the impact of ranking that is inseparable between each HEI over a ten-year period.

$$Brand\ Image\ (International\ Media) = \beta 0 + \beta 1\ Ranking + \lambda 1\ Country + \lambda 2\ Status + \varepsilon j \quad (1)$$

$$Brand\ Image\ (Regional\ Media) = \beta 0 + \beta 1\ Ranking + \lambda 1\ Country + \lambda 2\ Status + \varepsilon j \quad (2)$$

$$Brand\ Image\ (National\ Media) = \beta 0 + \beta 1\ Ranking + \lambda 1\ Country + \lambda 2\ Status + \varepsilon j` \quad (3)$$

$$Brand\ Image\ (Local\ Media) = \beta 0 + \beta 1\ Ranking + \lambda 1\ Country + \lambda 2\ Status + \varepsilon j \quad (4)$$

Where Brand Image (International Media) refers to the total number of times that international media (both online and offline) denoted or referred to the scholars or its scholarly outputs of the opted HEIs. Then ranking is defined by the degree of global HEI ranking annually published by QS World University Ranking. Country of origin, and Organizational status (public vs. private) are considered as the control variables. Brand Image (Regional Media) refers to the total number of times that regional media denoted or referred to the scholars or its scholarly outputs of the opted HEIs. Brand Image (National Media) refers to the total number of times that national media denoted or referred to the scholars or its scholarly outputs of the opted HEIs. Brand Image (Local Media) refers to the total number of times that local media denoted or referred to the scholars or its scholarly outputs of the opted HEIs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

	Ranking	Mass_media	Media international	Media local	Media national	Media regional	Awards count	Country	Status
Mean	594.5617	147.0681	9.017021	6.461702	16.52234	25.33298	0.944681	0.617021	0.255319
Median	625.0000	27.50000	0.000000	0.800000	3.900000	0.750000	0.000000	1.000000	0.000000
Maximum	1001.000	2861.000	283.0000	225.2000	317.7000	676.0000	26.00000	1.000000	1.000000
Minimum	11.00000	0.000000	0.000000	0.000000	0.000000	0.000000	0.000000	0.000000	0.000000
Std. Dev.	282.1846	362.9227	33.40818	19.59890	32.06391	89.23382	2.847421	0.486631	0.436505
Skewness	0.336433	-4.488854	5.710444	6.702243	4.182367	5.034330	5.019165	-0.481457	1.122285

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Kurtosis	2.076290	25.02124	37.45419	59.07042	27.53323	29.75621	33.03351	1.231801	2.259524
Jarque-Bera	25.57563	11075.04	25801.59	65086.63	13157.02	16004.92	19637.77	79.38558	109.4003
Probability	0.000000	0.000000	0.000000	0.000000	0.000000	0.000000	0.000000	0.000000	0.000000
Sum	279444.0	69122.00	4238.000	3037.000	7765.500	11906.50	444.0000	290.0000	120.0000
Sum Sq. Dev.	3734561	6177335	523453.9	180150.7	482176.3	3734494.	3802.562	111.0638	89.36170
Observations	470	470	470	470	470	470	470	470	470

Source: processed by the authors

The results of the panel data regression at 47 universities in Southeast Asia over ten years of data show that HEI rankings affect (a) brand image derived from the mass media in general, (b) brand image derived from international media, (c) brand image derived from regional media, (d) brand image derived from national media, (e) brand image derived from local media, and (f) brand image derived from awards received. The negative value causes from reversed value of ranking. Higher rankings indicate lower scores. For example, the world ranking of 10 HEIs is higher than that of 100 HEIs. These results show that HEI rankings are a factor that enhances brand image of international HEIs. The explanation of the R-Squared value is as follows. Model (a) can predict 25% of brand image of mass media in general. Model (b) can predict international brand image by 20%. Model (c) can predict 22% of regional brand image. Model (d) can predict 24% of national brand image. Model (e) can predict a 12% local brand image. Model (f) can predict a 24% brand image from awards. Other results on the control variables indicate that country and status generally do not show significant results on brand images. The country control variable only shows significant results on international brand image. In addition, the state shows significant results in the mass media.

Table 3. Regression Analysis Results

	Dependent Variables					
	(a) Mass_Media	**(b) Media_ Internationally**	**(c) Media_ Regionally**	**(d) Media_ Nationally**	**(e) Media_ Locally**	**(f) Awards_ Count**
Ranking	-0.61776***	-0.049153***	-0.139559***	-0.05334***	-0.022334***	-0.004736***
Country	121.2154***	14.53102***	43.05336	1.70255	2.979732	0.969275
Status	5.967209	3.141368	17.57493	-5.866339	-2.554048	-0.102995
R-squared	0.250312	0.201222	0.223109	0.24573	0.121537	0.248218

Source: processed by the authors

Our findings show that the function of HEI's ranking is rather diffuse and symbolic; that is, it can improve HEI's brand image. In the end, HEI rankings empirically affect the recruitment of international students (Soysal et al., 2022). Previous research has shown that international students

and other indicators are influenced by long-established institutional brand image, some proxies of which are based on institutional position in the ranking table. HEI's brand image, along with performance assessed in rankings, is a key indicator of success. The notion that efforts to press for changes in the yearly rankings have consequence is consistent with a concept that underpins important changes in the organization and governance of HEI. Rankings help legitimize brand images as symbolic items. Institutions that have long had a brand image for being at the top of the "prestige hierarchy" gain from the reinforcement of their symbolic value through socially mediated perceptions of brand image and ranking.

The rankings and their communication allow incommensurable comparison of institutions on a domestic and international scales, while also defining the kind of education that should receive the most funding (Espeland et al., 2016; Ramirez, 2013). Going even deeper, Rankings contribute to the idea that HEI and students are calculating, goal-oriented actors in the world (Hasse & Krücken, 2013; Marques & Powell, 2020). As long as government policies at the national level are tied to competitiveness in the global race for excellence, the HEI system will likely continue to rely on universal rankings to equalize HEI. Against the backdrop of the visibly HEI field's future uncertainty, the narrative of delegated superiority in rankings emerges as a road map of decisions and expectations (e.g., Beckert & Bronk, 2019).

To the contrary side, HEIs vary substantially in terms of their local and regional positions and their resources. In a world that is becoming increasingly multipolar, the opportunities for such differentiation will increase. In this perspective, towards the degree that involvement 'voluntary rankings', HEI and authorities may reassess whether participation in the rankings is actually a strategic option. This study expands the literature on higher education, providing ranking readings on multi-level brand image assessments. HEI rankings wield influence because they project a universal standard of value that is quantifiable and comparable and because investing in them is purposeful and achievable. Pursuit rankings serve as a surrogate indicator of aggressive agency execution for prospective students and alumni. From an HEI perspective, upgrading rankings is a strategic move, and some seek legitimacy in an increasingly standardized and transnational field of HEI. Thus, the whole essence of a HEI is tied to its position in rankings (Baltaru & Soysal, 2018; Bromley & Powell, 2012; Espeland et al., 2016).

HEI directly integrates ranking upgrades in its mission statement to indicate the a hunger for success. The larger narrative and ranked publications in the media publications make it easier for HEI to pay attention to this list. Despite a lack of empirical evidence for the effect of relative positioning on organizational outcomes, it is often emphasized and praised in the workplace (Fowles et al., 2016). Key performance indicators (KPIs) are measured on a yearly basis, e.g., increase in the number of applicants, increase in pass rate, increase in research funding, increase in citations, and increase in engagement with society and business. These KPIs are tightly coupled to the organization's strategy and actions.

CONCLUSION

World university rankings can be used as a strategy to increase regional image in Southeast Asia as well as internationally. HEIs in Southeast Asia can have similar internationalization conditions and challenges. Rankings are proven to generate multi-level image enhancement: local, national, regional, and international. Leaders and stakeholders in Southeast Asia HEIs must be aware of how rankings can help improve the HEIs image, which in turn impacts other matters such as international students, international faculties, international joint research, and other international programs. They can compare the activities of several other Southeast Asian HEIs. Fulfillment of the world HEI ranking matrix requires the right expertise and resources. Commitment is required because fulfilling

the matrix is a long-term program. Long-term funding for improving the global HEI ranking matrix is absolutely necessary, including for HEIs in Southeast Asia.

Future research could broaden the scope of regional data and use various types of world university rankings. In addition, other impacts, such as international students, inbound and outbound faculty, joint research, and other international indicators, can be further investigated. In connection with the mobility of international students and lecturers, research with a global impact, and research at an international level, requires continuous presence in the world's HEI rankings.

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