

Research Article

Prestige Matters: How Global Rankings Reshape Public Universities: National, Organisational, and Individual Dynamics in France

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This paper explores the influence of international university rankings on public universities. A multiple case study of three French universities examines the nature of this influence at national, organisational, and individual levels. A thematic analysis of interviews using NVivo software showed that the changes, either imposed by new policies or initiated by the university managers, have profoundly altered the traditional values of academia. The paper contributes to the discussion on the effects of quantifying higher education processes and outcomes under the guidelines of global rankings. The novel findings unfold the perception of academics regarding the experienced changes. After describing the current situation in the French higher education system, the paper predicts that universities will engage more actively in the quest for a better position in the future and will consequently accept the rules and norms of rankings. The competition will also amply a stratification among institutions and disciplines in the context of academic capitalism.

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1. Introduction

Given the increasing demand for external accountability and public transparency, rankings have been widely adopted in higher education^{[1][2][3]}. The need for accountability and responsible behaviour is stressed through greater emphasis on output controls^{[4][5]}. Evaluating the performance of higher education institutions (HEIs) includes assessing the quality of teaching and research activities.

As “quality” is a highly subjective and debatable concept^[6], university rankings have become a major topic of discussion. On the one hand, the rankings are presented as a relatively objective means of judging the quality of universities. They are also acclaimed to improve transparency and allow students to make informed choices. However, critics have questioned their objectivity since their evaluation methods depend strongly on the choice of indicators used^{[7][1][8][9][10][11][12]}. They also argue that rankings do not address some of the key functions of higher education and that the indicators applied measure distant proxies rather than quality itself^{[13][14][15][3][5][16]}.

Despite serious criticism and even opposition from academia, rankings are nonetheless widely accepted by higher education players and the wider public due to their simplicity and consumer-oriented information^{[17][18][1][9][5]}. Consequently, university rankings have been subject to increased academic scrutiny and critical debate in recent years.

Previous studies have explored rankings’ effects on different levels: on policymaking^{[19][5]}; on HEIs strategy and objectives^{[7][15][2][4][12][20]} on students’ choices (Clarke, 2007); on departments and other sub-units^{[18][21]}, on academics’ behaviour^{[22][13]}; and on university identity^{[18][14][2]}.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the discussion on the effects of international university rankings in the era of entrepreneurial university and academic capitalism. It answers the following research question: **How do international university rankings influence French public universities?** More specifically, we seek to understand: (1) what national policies have been shaped by ranking methodologies, (2) how universities integrate rankings into their strategic decision-making and organizational communications, and (3) how academics perceive and respond to the demands imposed by ranking systems.

To interpret these shifts, this study adopts the theoretical lens of academic capitalism^[23]. We posit that international rankings function as more than simple evaluation metrics; they are ‘market devices’ that enable the competitive accumulation of status. By framing the French context within this theory, we analyze how rankings drive institutions to reorganize their internal ‘academic production’ to align with external market signals, thereby reshaping the professional identities of the academic workforce

While much has been written about the methodologies employed, together with their inherent basis and problematic impact on higher education policies and practices, detailed case studies on the description of the influence remain an important desideratum in the literature^[7]. Also, despite their global character, the influence of international rankings needs to be studied within a national context, as national

systems, regularities and frameworks alter the institutional responses to this global trend and as the changes occurred at different rates in different contexts^[24]. Indeed, as explained by Collins and Park^[15], international rankings must be examined in terms of their interaction with “domestic historically generated notions of reputation, and in particular the rigidity of national hierarchies and the importance of domestic rank for students, alumni and both public and private funding” (p.128).

By bringing together policy documents, institutional strategies, and the lived experiences of faculty across three French public universities with distinct disciplinary missions and ranking positions, this study fills an important gap in understanding how external evaluation instruments create institutional and professional change in practice rather than merely in theory.

While international research has extensively documented ranking effects in Anglo-Saxon and Nordic contexts, the French higher education system presents a distinct and underexplored case. Unlike countries that adopted market-oriented models earlier, France has traditionally maintained a centralized, merit-based system with strong state control and relatively flat institutional hierarchies that emphasized equality across institutions. The recent introduction of international competition through rankings has therefore created a unique tension between these entrenched values and new performance-driven paradigms. Additionally, the French government's explicit policy response to poor ranking positions (including the LRU law and institutional mergers) represents a particularly instructive case of how a nation can explicitly attempt to reshape its entire higher education landscape in response to global ranking pressure^{[25][26][27]}. This provides a critical natural experiment for understanding how established national systems negotiate the pressures of global evaluation metrics. Furthermore, much existing literature on these dynamics has been conducted in French and remains inaccessible to international audiences, creating a significant gap in the Anglophone academic discourse on this phenomenon

The findings of this article contribute to the scientific literature on understanding how evaluation instruments, such as international rankings affect organizations and individuals in the higher education sector. The results demonstrate rankings as a managerial tool trigger institutional, policy and individual responses. Institutions seem to shape important part of their strategy aiming at better satisfying ranking criteria; French public policy appears to promote the environment which fosters competition and quantification of educational outcomes; Individual academics seem to prioritize the missions which are valued by the ranking visibility and thus, by institutional and national evaluation systems.

Given the analysis of academics' perception of experienced evolution and change in professional conduct, the paper also contributes to the debate of evolution of the academic profession. The findings enrich the literature on the academic capitalism, demonstrating how promoting more quantifiable results and the search for excellence in terms of validation from external parties (in opposition to a legitimacy traditionally granted by the pairs), triggers changes in academics' behaviour and may influence the value system which traditionally guides the academic profession.

2. Literature Review

International university rankings reflect judgmental assessments^[3] as they seek to evaluate universities in a quantitative way by comparing them with each other^{[28][29]}. One of the first international university rankings, the Shanghai ranking, was published in 2003 and was quickly followed by other, large-scale, indicator-based assessments of universities that were published either as a ranking (individual institutions ranked according to certain criteria) or as a rating (individual institutions assessed according to certain criteria). Although the rankings have been modified since they first appeared in a bid to improve their subjective methodology^{[7][9][30]}, they are still criticized for lacking sufficient theoretical clarity and methodological precision^{[14][15][12]}. Academics appear to agree that most international rankings "have fallen short of their larger goal of measuring quality"^[16] and that there is a "mismatch between the quality, reputation and ranking"^[15]. For example, a study of Russian universities showed how universities gain approximately 140 ranking positions through service contracts with rankers rather than genuine institutional improvement^[7].

Despite criticism, studies show institutional and systemic answers aiming at respecting the evaluation criteria promoted by the rankings^[17]. The literature review will first categorise the main criticism in previous studies and then will present the main reforms in France, claimed to be influenced by the ranking methodologies.

2.1. Main Criticisms of International Rankings

The criticism of the university rankings can be grouped into two main types: criticising the methodological shortcomings of rankings and criticizing their negative effects on higher education^[17]. One of the main criticisms concerns the attempt to quantify the quality of university performance. Scholars argue that higher education missions are so complex that it is impossible to measure them by

simple quantitative indicators^{[9][15][10][4][31]}. Some examples of quantitative indicators are the number of publications in ranked journals, number of students, internationalization degree and number of Nobel prizes. Scholars regret that this search for objectivity gives the impression that the value of education can simply be counted, hierarchically ordered, and uncontroversially judged^[3].

Another major criticism is that international university rankings reflect research performance far more accurately than teaching^{[32][9][10][4][11]}. As rankings neglect missions other than research, they do not evaluate all universities under the same conditions^{[14][3][5][33][16]}. For instance, the Shanghai ranking measures education quality by the number of Nobel prize winners among university graduates, which may be considered as linked to the quality of education, but in a very specific and somewhat indirect way. At the other extreme, some rankings judge teaching quality using staff/student ratios alone, without examining the teaching/learning relationship itself^[9]. Other studies also argue that putting research to the centre has impacted the public service mission of academics^[32].

One further argument against the rankings' methodology is that measuring the quality of research in all disciplines using similar bibliometric indicators is also questionable due to wide differences in research traditions between the social and natural sciences^[18]. Adopting bibliometric indicators to measure research quality is more adapted to exact and medical sciences than to human and social sciences, as traditionally, there are more publications and more citations per publication in natural sciences in the form of article, while social sciences tend to have other forms of publications.

There is also an issue with language. It has been noted that international rankings tend to favour universities from English-language nations as non-English language work is both published and cited less frequently^{[15][5][30]}. A study by the Leiden Ranking team showed that the citation impact of publications from French and German universities in French or German, respectively, was smaller than the citation impact of publications from the same universities published in English^[34].

In addition to seminal work on the failings of rankings' methodology, international rankings have also been considered to have had harmful effects^{[13][32][35][27][25][31][33]}. For example, Elken et al.^[2] argue that as rankings are not value free, they may have an impact on university identity as they emphasize some aspects of university activities at the expense of others. In this regard, studies mainly deplore two aspects. First, the neoliberal ideology of rankings is viewed as a threat to the traditional philosophy of education. For example, rankings are claimed to go against the democratic vision of higher education as they impose a normative view of what is a "good university"^{[35][25]}. Others consider that rankings

neglect the public service mission of universities^{[14][32]}. And as rankings overlook the diversity and complexity of HEIs' missions^[14], they alter HEIs' identity^[31]. Yet others regret that rankings artificially create markets for universities and introduce market-like forces which contribute to establishment and maintenance of academic capitalism^[23]. Funding universities based on performance leads to overinvestment of resources at the few elite institutions and underinvestment for the broad mass of universities in the middle and lower ranks^[28].

The second major concern is that international rankings will suppress national specificities^{[10][25][36][5][33]}. Rankings can help globalize a specific discourse on excellence that will be universally applied regardless of local context^[29]. Some consider that it is not possible to compare all national systems with the same tools as they differ considerably^[8]. Additionally, considering Anglo-Saxon countries as a model of excellence is wrong and somewhat harmful^{[25][36]}.

2.2. French Response to International Rankings

Many agree that the “disappointing image” of French universities, pushed the French government to undertake certain reforms to improve the country’s overall positioning in international rankings^{[18][33]}. In one of her press interviews in 2008, the Minister of Higher Education and Research, Valérie Pécresse, declared that the “bad grades” in international rankings reveal the urgency to reform the French university system (Echos, 2008). In another interview, she stated that the aim of her major reform was to “see ten French universities in the top hundred universities in the Shanghai ranking” (Le Figaro¹).

One reform is the law LRU (university autonomy law), which was introduced as an answer to the poor positioning of universities by helping them to “define their scientific priorities”. (speech by Nicolas Sarkozy, 2009). Other reforms directly aimed at improving the position of “some” French universities in certain world rankings, such as the creation of the National Agency of Research (ANR), the creation of the Research and Higher Education Evaluation Agency (AERES), the introduction of Research and Higher Education centres (PRES), and increasing universities’ organisational autonomy by way of the LRU law. The main idea behind all these reforms was to introduce economies of scale by grouping major research and education institutions to give them more international visibility^[18].

Like their counterparts, French academics have strongly criticized the ranking methodologies, questioning their capacity to objectively judge university performance^{[26][27]}. One concern that nearly every study in France has raised is the fear that implementation of these public policies, in addition to the

more direct impact of global rankings on French universities, could alter their traditional way of functioning^{[36][25]}. Studies of different national contexts (Australia, UK) have demonstrated that changes at public policy level provoke changes in organisational and professional settings in academia^{[19][37]}. Indeed, French studies have also put forward certain criticisable actions initiated by French universities and academics which could have been influenced by international rankings^{[35][38][39][36]}.

2.3. Theoretical Framework and Research Expectations

The theory of academic capitalism provides a robust framework for understanding the organizational transformation of public universities. Defined as the prioritization of the economic impact of research over its scientific one in the pursuit of excellence and competitiveness^{[40][41]}, academic capitalism goes beyond the commercialization of research and evokes a deeper structural shift where higher education institutions increasingly function as strategic economic actors^[23]. In this regime, universities compete for scarce resources, such as funding, high-achieving students, and 'star' faculty, by maximizing their prestige in the global marketplace. Thus, it implies prioritizing economic rationales over scientific logic and public value^[42]. Universities are expected not only to increase their own competitiveness but the competitiveness of their national economy^[43].

Within this framework, international rankings serve as critical instruments of quantification and visibility. They standardize the definition of 'excellence,' effectively converting academic outputs (publications, citations, international partnerships) into measurable capital^[29]. They also require a reorganization of 'academic production,' where managerial governance structures expand to monitor and incentivize performance metrics that enhance the institution's competitive position^{[43][23]}. Studies have demonstrated the effects of these shifts at different levels: systemic level with national reforms of funding and evaluation^{[42][28][19][4][32]}; institutional level with universities implementing policies specifically designed to optimize ranking indicators^{[44][21][2][45]}; or individual levels which academics internalize the criteria of the external metrics^{[18][13][46]} (Tagliaventi et al., 2021).

This literature review paves the way to an examination of whether similar changes have occurred in the French context. In a context of very little empirical research investigating the real impact of this phenomenon on French universities, we adopt the model of Parker and Jary^[37] to illustrate the results of a detailed case study on the effects of world rankings on three French universities. A study carried out by Jary and Parker^[37] suggested a three-layer model to investigate changes in the field of higher education:

national, organisational and individual levels. The model was influenced by earlier work of Clark^[47] and Becher and Kogan^[48] and further developed by the authors to examine major changes in the UK's higher education system in the 1990s. The authors argued that changes in the political and institutional context (change at national or structural level) lead to forms of corporate work organisation (organisational level changes) that increase the power of management and decrease the autonomy and motivation of academics (changes at the level of individual or action)^[37].

Drawing on the work of Parker and Jary, who theorized that structural changes cascade through organizational systems to affect individual behavior. We assume that international rankings, operating as a global structural force, may influence universities through three interconnected mechanisms: (1) at the policy level, by prompting governments to reform legislation and create institutional structures favorable to ranking performance; (2) at the organizational level, by shaping strategy documents, institutional mergers, and management priorities; and (3) at the individual level, by altering academics' professional identities, work priorities, and career incentive structures. Moreover, the literature review allows us to assume that a university's existing position in rankings and its disciplinary composition will moderate these effects—well-established research-intensive universities may show less responsive behavior compared to less prestigious or teaching-focused institutions. This study tests these expectations through qualitative investigation of three universities with varying disciplinary profiles and ranking positions. The choice of French universities allows testing these assumptions in a context of a strong national system and tradition.

3. Research Methodology and Data Analysis

The choice of a qualitative approach was determined by the exploratory nature of our research as well as the complexity of the study context. Our research question – *how the international rankings influence French universities* – involves understanding the experiences of universities as organisations and the experience of the faculty as a profession. A multiple case study^[49] was used to analyse the changes perceived by academics from different universities.

Three French universities served as case studies for our research. The choice of institutions was based on two criteria. First, we selected universities specialising in various disciplinary fields (i.e., science, social science, and a multidisciplinary university) to compare the impact of rankings on different disciplines. Second, we chose universities with different positions in the international rankings. To retain the

interviewees' anonymity, we renamed the three universities as University A (UA), University B (UB) and University C (UC).

UA is one of the biggest science universities in France. The institution describes itself as the research university that embodies "French scientific excellence", and it is well positioned in international rankings (top 50). UB is a French multidisciplinary university that is famous for innovation and internalization. It has a relatively good position in nearly all international rankings (50-100). UC is a very big French university, famous for human and social sciences and for its large campus. It has either a very poor position or does not appear at all in international rankings.

The main source of the empirical data comes from 25 semi-structured individual interviews with the faculty. As our unit of observation is limited to representatives from three universities, we maximized the variety of respondents: different experience, disciplinary field, and function at the university. Most respondents occupy senior management positions (president, vice president) and middle management positions (deans, head of administrative departments). Only four of the interviewees were academic staff with no administrative or hierarchical responsibilities². The seven heads of major administrative departments interviewed in the study do not hold academic degree but have management education and experience. Interviews took place in the offices of the interviewees and lasted approximately one hour. They were guided by core questions addressing respondents' perceptions of rankings, organizational responses to them, and changes in academic work. Slightly different emphasis was placed in interviews depending on respondent position: those in senior management were asked more detailed questions about strategic decision-making, while academic staff were asked more extensively about changes in daily work practices and career pressures. All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed.

| Position | UA | UB | UC | Total |
|----------------------|----|----|----|-------|
| University president | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| Vice president | 1 | 2 | 1 | 4 |
| Dean | 3 | 4 | 1 | 8 |
| Chief administrator | 2 | 3 | 1 | 6 |
| Academic | 1 | 2 | 1 | 4 |
| Total | 8 | 12 | 5 | 25 |

Table 1. Interview respondents

In addition to the interviews, our empirical data includes 30 internal and external documents, namely, the universities' annual reports, budgets, internal regulations, online publications, and university brochures. We also attended some meetings at the three universities where we took notes. For example, at the UC we attended two meetings of the governing body where important decisions were voted about the university's strategy of scientific publications. In addition to the explicit references to rankings, these data were analyzed for strategic language regarding 'visibility', 'international positioning', 'excellence', 'exposure'... and resource allocation patterns. The data also gave us insights into the organisational contexts. Last, we analysed major legislative texts pertaining to higher education and enacted in France since the 2000s to help us identify links between public policies and international rankings: law LRU (2007), law ESR (2013), reform ANR (2007), reform AERES (2006).

The empirical data was analysed by thematic analysis. We translated the data into grounded theory by applying naturalistic inquiry processes^[50], including constant comparison and theoretical sampling^[51]. Our initial approach was a first-order analysis involving full coding of the interview transcription and documents. Reading of the first material enabled us to develop initial thematic codes which were completed during *in vivo* coding^[52] using the NVivo software. This first-order coding identified the following key topics related to ranking: *evaluation, pressure, publication, competition, public reforms, discipline specificities, communication, university missions, academic profession, university strategy and objectives, and Human resource management*.

These empirical concepts were grouped according to their significance^[53]. Our themes were predominantly descriptive, i.e., they described patterns in the data relevant to the role of international rankings in university functioning. At this stage of the analysis, we identified the ‘essence’ of each theme and a causal relationship between them^[53]. Five main dimensions emerged: Ranking as a reason of academic profession modification; Ranking as a university communication tool; Ranking as a strategy guideline for universities; Ranking as a public policy vector; and Ranking as a source of competition. Figure 1 illustrates these dimensions as well as the constituent themes and examples from the empirical data which led to the formation of these themes.

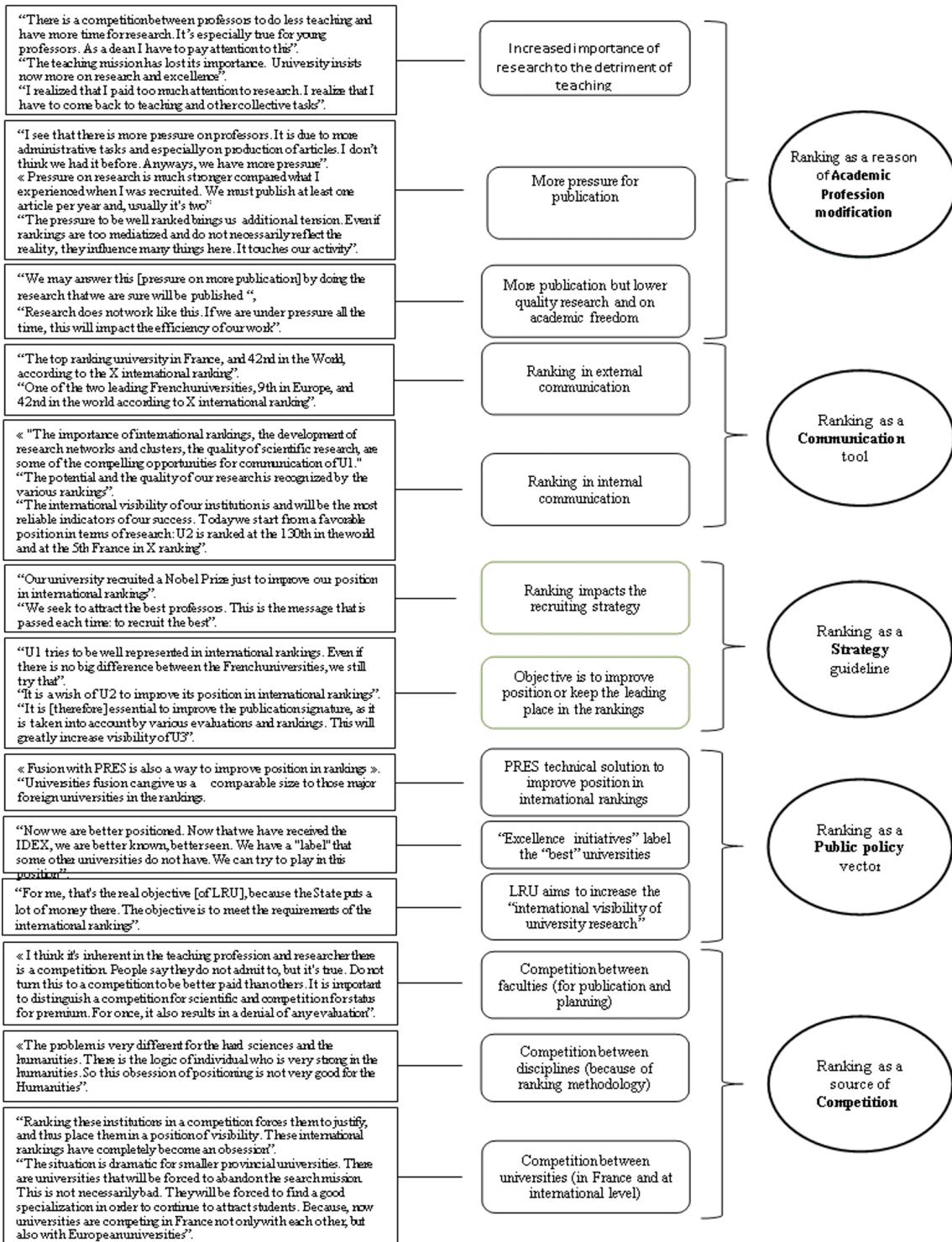


Figure 1. Main dimensions of the influence of ranking on the French university

4. Discussion of the Main Findings

To identify how international university rankings interfere with universities, we grouped the main findings of this research under three categories. At national level, various public policies have been influenced by international rankings with the aim to improve the position of France (French universities) in international rankings; At the organizational level a number of management decisions have been made to respect the rankings' requirements; At the individual level rankings have changed the way academics perceive and exercise their profession, namely because of the increased pressure for publication. Figure 2 summarizes these findings which are detailed in the following sections.

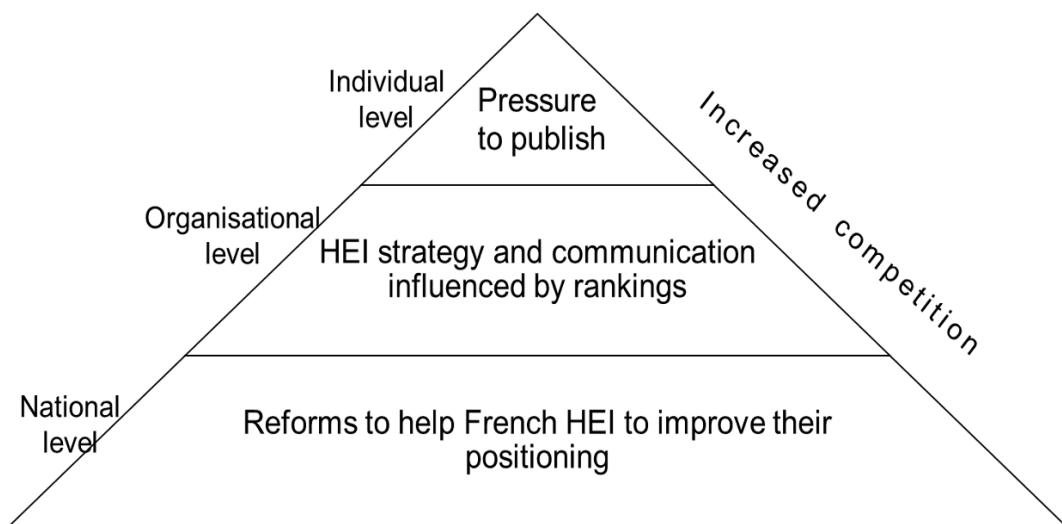


Figure 2. The influence of international rankings on the French higher education

4.1. Ranking as a Public Policy Vector

Consistent with the literature^{[43][28][8][19][4]}, the influence of rankings at national level in the French higher education system is observed in several pieces of legislation passed in France since the beginning of the 2000s designed to promote French higher education at international level. Two main goals emerged from our analysis of this legislation, 'influenced' by the international ranking methodologies, that are common to most of the reforms: "increase international visibility", "promote French research" and "make French university a world-class centre of research".

One of the most important reforms in this sense is a law on university autonomy, also called the law of Liberties and Responsibilities of Universities – *LRU*. This law mainly reorganizes university governance by giving the institutions local management in terms of budget, human resources and real estate. One of the three directives of the law is to “make university research visible at international level” (mission letter from Valérie Pécresse to Nicolas Sarkozy, 5 July, 2007).

Another important policy is the *PRES* (Research and Higher Education Centres) reform which restructured the university map in France by grouping institutions into research and higher education centres. The *PRES* are federated structures that aim to achieve greater “*readability and quality of research according to the highest international standards*” through the cooperation of different HEIs. Cooperation often occurs through mergers (e.g., merging universities in Strasbourg and Aix-Marseille) that significantly increase the size of universities. Many respondents noted the influence of rankings on this reform. “*We can say that one way to achieve the goal [of better positioning] for France is to merge several universities to reach a larger size so as to become a strong player in a region, as well as at national and international level*” (UC_1VP).

4.2. Ranking as a Strategy Guideline

The influence of international rankings at the organizational level of French universities is twofold: rankings are used as a communication tool and as a strategy guideline. For Hetzel^[39], even if ranking is not a strategy, it can be used as a tool to help improve universities’ strategic positioning. The strategic documents analysed in this study demonstrate the influence of global ranking methodology on strategic decisions made at organisational level. For instance, one important strategic decision at UA was to merge with another “big” institution in order to “*give the university new international visibility*” and increase its international appeal (UA *Projet d'établissement* 2009-2012: 29). Size is a key variable in some international rankings, like the Shanghai ranking, which compares the number of students, student-teacher ratios, and other numerical criteria^[9]. A university contract from UB explains that “*visibility is essential*” for its attractiveness, which can be achieved “*by more rigorous signature and citation of our publications*” (*Contrat d'établissement* 2009-2012: 8). Even though UC does not feature in most of the world rankings, the university is also concerned by the visibility issue. A UC report on international rankings advises the institution’s management team that, despite the inadequacy of the ranking methodology and UC scientific policies, “*certain actions should be undertaken in order to improve the institution’s visibility*” (UC report on international rankings. p. 18).

Over 40% of the interviewees (none from UC) confirmed our observation from the document analysis that the main objective of UA and UB is to do better in international rankings. To our question “*what do you think is your university's strategy?*”, several replied that it is “*to have a better position in the international rankings.*” The presidents of both UA and UB also gave similar messages. For the president of UA, the real objective is to be more effective in research and teaching and, “*if ranking helps to show the performance, then it's good to be part of it.*” Likewise, for the vice president of UB, it is important to be “*visible at international level and, as research is done within a network and bibliometrics are important in rankings, it's good to have a good position*” (UB_5_VP).

Similarly, previous studies have shown that international rankings now play an important role in university strategies. This can be observed in annual reports and strategic plans^{[44][20]} and in diverse actions undertaken aiming at improving HEIs' position in rankings^[12]. For example, Elken et al.,^[2] showed that while rankings were not commonly mentioned in Nordic universities' strategic plans, there were few exceptions, where universities clearly acknowledged that their goal was to figure among the top universities. Similarly, Chirikov^[7] demonstrated how Russian universities adapt their strategic actions according to the ranking criteria.

It is important to note that different ranking systems exert differential effects. Our respondents distinguished between institutional rankings (particularly the Shanghai ranking for its emphasis on research output and size) and journal-level rankings (including Impact Factor and Scopus metrics), with the latter often perceived as more immediately consequential for individual career advancement. The strategic documents analyzed in this study reveal that UA and UB explicitly aligned organizational initiatives with the Shanghai ranking methodology, which measures criteria such as institution size, student-teacher ratios, and the number of highly cited researchers.

4.3. Ranking as a Communication Tool for 'Successful' Universities

Rankings and, more especially, a good position in international rankings, appear to influence universities' external and internal messages addressed to different stakeholders. UA, which is very well positioned in world rankings, always highlights this fact in internal and external communications. In internal communication, its ranking is used to remind faculty that “*the quality of their research is acknowledged by international rankings*” and that “*UA can boast a very strong presence in the ranking of French higher education*” (*Projet d'établissement*, 2009-2012). In external communication, UA notes its ranking position on the very first page of each communication, stating that UA is “*the top-ranked*

university in France" (Program brochure). On fewer occasions UB also stresses that the "potential and the quality" of its research is recognized by the various rankings: "The international visibility of our institution is and will be the most reliable indicator of our success. Today we start from a favourable position in terms of research: UB is ranked as the 5th French institution" (*Projet d'établissement*, 2009–2012). As expected, given its poor positioning, we found not a single UC communication mentioning rankings.

Opposite results can be found in literature. For example, a study of Elken et al.^[2] examining the place of rankings in the internal and external communication of Nordic universities, showed only very limited use of rankings on university websites (good position of certain universities only in the major rankings).

4.4. Effects of International Rankings on the Academic Profession

Analysis of twenty-five individual interviews shows that the rankings have interfered with the academic profession in several ways. First, the importance given to research in ranking methodologies has altered the balance between traditional teaching and research. French faculty pay considerable attention to this mission at the expense of teaching and other activities. Most of the respondents are conscious of the growing emphasis on journal ranking and focus more on what !. In the context of overall decrease in university budgets, the budget for research was either constant or increased.

This tendency is not specific to France. The study by Ter Bogt and Scapens^[3], for example, demonstrated that activities which are not included in the quantitative performance measurement system are largely neglected. Academics have adapted to the new system and concentrate on "satisfying" the underlying requirements. A recent study showed that universities act strategically in how they seek to both influence and respond to annual ranking releases, especially when it comes to their research activity. Changes are made to contribute to a significant rise in their ranking^[44]. White et al.^[46] point out that academics who achieve extremely high research output are those who, alongside personal interest in research activity, have more time to conduct research thanks to a reduced teaching workload and administrative support from their institutions. A study by Tagliaventi et al.^[32] showed similarly that some academics tend to adopt more research orientation compared to other missions.

Second, the emphasis on research to the detriment of teaching inevitably impacts teaching quality. "Nobody cares about what you teach now. There is no control. All they check is how many articles you publish a year" (UB 37 AC). Our findings are in line with a study by Drucker-Godard et al.^[38] that also demonstrated a "devaluation of teaching duties" due to the new evaluation practices observed in academia. Similarly, Ter

Bogt and Scapens^[3] found that academics focused mainly on research and only ensured that their teaching performance was at least satisfactory.

Third, there seems to be a danger that the quality of research would deteriorate due to the above-mentioned changes. Some interviewees said that they prefer to undertake research which is certain to be published rather than research they are personally interested in or has a higher value for the field. This point also arose in a study by Ter Bogt and Scapens^[3] who observed that it was possible to manipulate measured research performance to falsely claim, for example, that papers were co-written in order to “take advantage of the weights attached to joint publications”^[3]. Recent research argued that significant part of academics, especially those who try to maintain all their missions, are not “achieving satisfying performance in any domain according to international standards”^[32].

Slight difference can be observed among academics with and without managerial responsibilities when academic managers^[54] seem to legitimize the adoption of ranking-influenced policies. Rather than expressing outright resistance, many managers articulated what might be characterized as a 'pragmatic acceptance' of ranking systems. When asked whether alternatives to ranking-driven strategy existed, several deans and vice presidents responded with language suggesting a sense of inevitability. One dean stated: “What can be done? These are the metrics that they use. We can criticize the methodology, but we can not ignore them”. These findings align with broader literature on how audit and performance measurement cultures reshape institutional values and individual subjectivities.

4.5. Ranking as a Source of Increased Competition

Ranking and competition is a two-way relationship. Rankings expectedly seem to establish or strengthen the culture of competition. However, existing competition among national universities seem to have pushed universities to use rankings as a differentiation strategy. While some respondents directly blamed competition in the French higher education system on rankings, especially the Shanghai ranking, others considered that existing competition made it “necessary” to have rankings to help students easily see differences between institutions (UB_5_VP). This view is in line with the findings of Ter Bogt and Scapens^[3], according to which “*the importance of rankings has increased largely because of the competition between universities, both nationally and internationally, as well as the more general internationalization of the university sector*”^[3]. Intensified competition and struggle for funds, largely because of increasing impact of international and national rankings is sharpening institutional stratification in higher education field^[28]. Similarly, Poutanen^[42] argues that new demands for competitiveness placed on Finish higher

education institutions in a stringer competition at national level, namely for funding. As concluded by Brankovic et al.^[29], by evaluating performances relative to each other through a hierarchical visualization format, rankings transform abstract notions of quality into concrete competitive positions.

Competition is observed at different levels in our study: between academics, departments or disciplines, institutions and countries. A shift from local to global competition between universities reinforced existing rivalry between the French HEIs for financial resources and for attracting students and leading researchers. However, our study does not confirm the differentiation between university types as it is the case in most Anglo-Saxon literature which mention a vertical differentiation between research-intensive HEIs and others and among the different grades of research-intensive HEIs^[5].

In addition to competition between universities for a better position in the international rankings, respondents also talk about competition “*inside institutions across different disciplines*” (UA_17_Dir). As noted above, previous studies have argued that the ranking system favours some disciplines more than others^{[16][39][3]}. Accordingly, one dean explained that “*the problem is very different for natural and human sciences. There is a logic of individualism which is very strong in the humanities. So, this positioning obsession may not be very positive for them.*” (UB_22_Dir). A recent study of Marques and Powell^[21] showed that units within HEIs compete not only for material resources, but especially for symbolic resources, such as reputation and legitimacy. Our study also highlights a similar trend, where some research directors regret losing prestige because of not performing well according to international indicators.

Natural sciences and fields with high publication volumes responded more readily to ranking metrics, as their disciplinary traditions align with bibliometric indicators emphasized in rankings. Conversely, humanities and social sciences face a more profound tension. There is a logic of individualism which is very strong in the humanities. So, this positioning obsession may not be very positive for them. This disciplinary variation has cascading effects. Research units in natural sciences secured increasing budget allocations and institutional support, while humanities departments found themselves in a paradoxical position of being evaluated on metrics (publication frequency, citation impact) that do not reflect their disciplinary traditions of monographs, slower publication cycles, and diverse knowledge outputs.

Competition appears to be amplified between faculty as well. As some interviewees remarked, even if people do not admit it, competition has increased to be “better than others.” However, it is worth mentioning that this competition concerns research and not teaching. “*Some young professors try to do a minimum of teaching and a maximum of research. This is due to increased pressure to publish. It's very clearly*

stated in our objectives" (UA_16_Dir). This point was also noted in many previous studies mentioned in this paper. For example, a study on factors influencing extremely high or low research output from American business faculty members showed that research "stars" report being given more time to do research as they enjoy greater institutional support in the form of graduate assistants and summer research support. They also seem to have less course preparation^[46]. Our findings are in line with the observation of Marginson and van der Wende^[5] that intensified competition based on research performance will exacerbate demand for high-quality scientific labour.

Most of the interviewees regret the changes perceived because of the international university rankings. Most importantly, interviewees regret the rise of competition observed at various levels. "*I feel that the purpose of rankings is to install competition at national level in France. This means ignoring the weaker universities and seeing if they can survive. Competition is presented as a form of natural selection* (UC_7_PR). This point is particularly sensitive for the French academics as the hierarchisation goes against the traditional value of equality strongly embedded in the French education.

However, in contrast to the results of previous studies, around 35% of the interviewees did not criticize the impact of rankings, instead describing it in a neutral and positive way. Being part of a well-ranked university gives the UA faculty a feeling of pride. Some declared, that "*it's still prestigious to belong to the first French university in international rankings*" (UA_13_Dir).

Being part of a prestigious organisation also helps in development of organisational identity and corporate belonging as opposed to disciplinary identity. Traditionally in France faculty identify themselves vis-à-vis their discipline rather than the institution in which they work^[22]. Several factors can explain this. First, the faculty is recruited centrally by the Ministry of Higher Education and Research and until 2008 (LRU law), human resource management was also centralised at Ministry level. Second, and probably most important, until 1968, French university was divided vertically at the level of different disciplines without much coordination between them^[55]. This separation between the faculties (disciplines) was reinforced by the creation of hierarchical and centralized streams that managed their academic staff. Each faculty had its own internal regulations. This traditional dual disciplinary division "*was the main reason that made it impossible to create a university organisation in France*" even after the 1968 reform which on paper ended this structure by creating independent interdisciplinary entities^[55].

5. Conclusion

The aim of this research was to shed light onto the effect of international university rankings of public universities in the context of a strong national context and higher education tradition. Our investigation shows that external evaluation instruments like rankings, contribute to the establishment of the academic capitalism and operate as potential global force that cascades through policy creation, organizational strategy, and individual professional practice. At the national level, the French government explicitly reformed legislation and created new institutional structures specifically to improve positioning in international rankings (See the findings of [\[19\]](#)[\[4\]](#) for international examples). At the organizational level, universities strategically merged, reorganized research priorities, and shaped internal communications around ranking performance, similar to what is documented in foreign literature[\[44\]](#)[\[15\]](#)[\[2\]](#)[\[45\]](#)[\[12\]](#)[\[20\]](#). At the individual level, academics report intensified pressure to publish in high-impact journals and increasingly prioritize research over teaching and service missions. Similar trends were detected in previous studies[\[22\]](#)[\[13\]](#)[\[32\]](#)[\[38\]](#)[\[3\]](#).

By examining the case of three French public universities, this study provides additional insights into the complexity of the effects of international rankings on higher education and contributes to the literature on the evolution of higher education sector with novel and nuanced findings.

First, it seems that the degree of institutional responsiveness to rankings depends substantially on a university's existing position and prestige. We argue that universities which are already well-established nationally are less compelled to dramatically restructure themselves, while less prestigious institutions will undertake more extensive organizational changes. The academic literature is rich with criticism of rankings, according to which the latter give viable results for only 5% of the world's universities. Most French universities are left out of the equation. The reason for this can be traced to the ranking methodology that privileges large, scientific-based research universities, English-speaking countries, etc. [\[17\]](#)[\[18\]](#)[\[1\]](#)[\[8\]](#)[\[9\]](#)[\[30\]](#). Given this fact, the French universities are either flattered or disconcerted, depending on their position in the rankings. Our findings show that in the attempt to upgrade their positioning, they those with less attractive position in the rankings, are strongly tempted to improve their performance specifically in the areas measured by ranking indicators. Re recent withdrawal of the Sorbonne University from several major global rankings³ strengthens our argument.

Second, our findings contribute to the literature on the evolution of academic profession and the establishment of the “publish or perish” mindset. As research is more valued in international rankings

and local evaluations, Faculty tends to privilege research over other activities,^{[22][13][32][38][46][54]}. As a result, there is more pressure for academic output, negligence of teaching mission and overall increased competition^{[21][3][30]}. More interestingly, our study shows that approximately one-third of interviewed academics embraced the competitive dynamics introduced by rankings, finding pride and motivation in being part of a well-ranked institution. While it is hard to find positive outcomes of rankings in Anglo-Saxon research (see namely ^[45]), one interesting result we observed in our paper is the positive attitude of some faculty towards the changes experienced. Interviewed academics from the well ranked university acknowledge the benefits of being well represented in international rankings. The specificity of the French higher education system may explain this finding: on the one hand, a good position in the rankings gives universities an advantage in the context of competition with the *Grandes Écoles* and, on the other hand, it enhances the faculty's sense of corporate belonging with respect to their institutions in contrast to the traditional identification with their profession.

This brings to a third interesting observation which needs additional attention in future studies. The different degree of responsiveness among institutions, disciplinary fields and individuals detected in our study may amplify the hierarchisation between the higher education actors^{[43][18][28][29][23]}. In line with the literature on the marketisation of higher education, our findings highlight how ranking pressures foster deep internal fragmentation within French universities. We observe the consolidation of the academic manager, a role defined by a pragmatic acceptance of external metrics; unlike their colleagues, these leaders have internalized ranking indicators as an inevitable reality of modern governance. Our findings also detect a potential stratification among disciplines, creating an unequal playing field where some disciplines accumulate capital while others risk marginalization. As the evolution of the higher education eco-system demands new rules of the game^[56], whereas not all are equipped with the necessary resources and knowledge on how to play with new rules and principles promoted by the new forms of governance and management^[28]. Consequently, the pursuit of international visibility not only pits universities against one another but also incites fierce internal competition for symbolic legitimacy and resources.

Despite its important contribution to the literature on the evolution of the higher education field, the authors acknowledge several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings of this pilot study. A qualitative research approach allowed us to detect the perceptions and experience of the French academics from public universities. However, the findings are unlikely to be generalised as the institutional context and national particularities can be influencing them. A quantitative study can assess

the main variables identified in this research. Second, it is still too early to predict what the outcome of these changes will be. Our paper describes the present situation in the French higher education system. However, we may assume from the experience of some foreign countries that French universities will also strive more actively for a better position and thus, will accept the rules and norms of rankings^{[44][15]} [4] (Hazelkorn, 2013). This will alter even further the academic profession. This observation on diversification of academic profession echoes Whitchurch and Grodon^[24] on the diversification of professional identities in higher education. A comparative study across different institutional and systemic contexts can overcome this limitation.

Statements and Declarations

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Conflicts of Interest

No potential competing interests to declare.

Ethics

This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. As per institutional and national guidelines at Paris Nanterre University, France at the time the research was conducted, formal ethics approval was not required for interview-based social science research deemed to be of minimal risk. All participants were fully informed of the study's objectives and methodology, and all provided voluntary oral informed consent to participate. Participant anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses have been maintained throughout the research process.

Author Contributions

All authors participated in the conception of the study and the development of the methodology and wrote the original draft. All authors participated in the review and editing of the manuscript and approved its final version.

Footnotes

¹ “Pécresse veut dix universités dans l’élite Mondiale”, 6 August 2008. Interview with Valérie Pécresse, Minister of Higher Education and Research.

² In the French higher education system, a university president, vice president and dean are necessarily academics.

³ [Why Sorbonne pulled out of university ranking | Science | Business](#)

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