

Strategic Transformation Toward World-Class University: The Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) Ranking System Implementation at a Public University in South Kalimantan

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Abstrak

Lanskap pendidikan tinggi global menuntut perguruan tinggi untuk terus meningkatkan daya saingnya melalui peningkatan kualitas yang sistematis dan pengakuan internasional. Sebuah universitas regional di Indonesia (selanjutnya disebut "Institusi") telah menunjukkan kemajuan signifikan dalam peringkat nasional dan regional, sehingga menempatkan dirinya secara strategis untuk mendapatkan pengakuan global. Studi ini mengkaji kerangka kebijakan strategis Institusi untuk mencapai status universitas kelas dunia melalui penerapan sistem peringkat Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), dengan target masuk ke dalam 1.500 universitas terbaik dunia pada tahun 2027. Pendekatan analisis kebijakan komprehensif digunakan, dengan mengkaji kekuatan institusi, imperatif strategis, dan indikator kinerja. Penelitian ini mensintesis data dari peringkat nasional (Edurank 2025, AD Scientific Index 2025) dan metrik institusi, dengan mengintegrasikan kerangka metodologi peringkat QS. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa institusi ini telah mencapai peringkat yang menonjol, termasuk peringkat ke-27 secara nasional, ke-532 di Asia, dan ke-1.802 secara internasional (Edurank 2025), serta diakui sebagai salah satu dari 15 institusi terkemuka secara nasional (AD Scientific Index 2025) dan konsisten menduduki peringkat teratas di wilayah provinsinya. Tiga pilar strategis telah diidentifikasi: Penelitian Kelas Dunia (menargetkan 800 publikasi Scopus/WoS per tahun), Internasionalisasi (menargetkan 6-10% mahasiswa internasional), dan Reputasi Global (menargetkan skor reputasi QS sebesar 45%). Kerangka kerja transformasi strategis, yang didasarkan pada daya saing regional, kualitas talenta, dampak penelitian, reputasi nasional, dan investasi internasional, menyediakan jalur yang kokoh bagi kemajuan institusi. Pelaksanaannya memerlukan pemantauan sistematis melalui kerangka kerja KPI, dasbor real-time, dan mekanisme akuntabilitas yang mencakup evaluasi proses, output, hasil, dan dampak.

Kata Kunci: Universitas kelas dunia, peringkat QS, transformasi strategis, kebijakan pendidikan tinggi, internasionalisasi, pendidikan tinggi di Indonesia

Abstract

The global higher education landscape demands universities to continuously enhance their competitiveness through systematic quality improvement and international recognition. A regional Indonesian university (hereinafter referred to as "the Institution") has demonstrated significant progress in national and regional rankings, positioning itself strategically for global recognition. This study examines the Institution's strategic policy framework for achieving world-class university status through the implementation of the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranking system, targeting entry into the top 1,500 universities globally by 2027. A comprehensive policy analysis approach was employed, examining institutional strengths, strategic imperatives, and performance indicators. The study synthesizes data from national rankings (Edurank 2025, AD Scientific Index 2025) and institutional metrics, incorporating the QS ranking methodology framework. Results of the research, the Institution has achieved notable rankings including 27th nationally, 532nd in Asia, and 1802nd internationally (Edurank 2025), with recognition among 15 leading institutions nationally (AD Scientific Index 2025) and consistent top ranking in its provincial region. Three strategic pillars have been identified: World-Class Research (targeting 800 Scopus/WoS publications annually), Internationalization (targeting 6-10% international students), and Global Reputation (targeting QS reputation score of 45%). The strategic transformation framework, grounded in regional competitiveness, talent quality, research impact, national reputation, and international investment, provides a robust pathway for the Institution's advancement. Implementation requires systematic monitoring through KPI frameworks, real-time dashboards, and accountability mechanisms incorporating process, output, outcome, and impact evaluations.

Keywords: World-class university, QS ranking, strategic transformation, higher education policy, internationalization, Indonesian higher education

Preliminary

The contemporary landscape of higher education is increasingly defined by global competition, where institutional rankings function not only as markers of prestige but also as indicators of academic quality, research strength, and societal impact (Asfia & Sari, 2024). Universities today must navigate complex quality assurance systems while simultaneously positioning themselves within an international arena (Amaliah & Suriansyah, 2025). Balancing the dual imperative of remaining locally relevant and achieving global excellence has become a central strategic challenge—particularly for institutions in developing countries that must adapt to competitive pressures with limited resources (Erisher et al., 2014).

The institution analyzed in this study—hereinafter referred to as “the Institution”—is a public university located in one of Indonesia’s resource-rich provincial regions. Originally established to serve local educational needs, the Institution now stands at an important phase of organizational transformation. Its recent accomplishments underscore this momentum: a national ranking of 27th (Hidayati & Subiyakto, 2025). Asian ranking of 532nd, and a global ranking of 1802nd. Moreover, its designation as one of the 15 leading national universities by the AD Scientific Index 2025, combined with its attainment of the highest national accreditation and its longstanding leadership role within the province, highlight both its institutional capacity and its growing regional significance (Kuswati et al., 2025).

Located in a province endowed with tropical forests, wetland ecosystems, mineral resources, and fertile agricultural land, the Institution occupies a unique ecological and socio-economic environment (Ansari, 2025). This context offers substantial opportunities to develop distinctive research strengths and educational programs that address local development needs while also contributing to broader global sustainability agendas (Triyono, 2025). Within this global landscape, the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings—introduced in 2004—has emerged as one of the most widely referenced international benchmarking systems. The combination of perception-based measures and quantifiable performance data provides a comprehensive portrait of institutional performance and competitiveness (Del-Castillo-Feito et al., 2019; Kuswati et al., 2025).

For emerging Southeast Asian universities, the QS system is particularly relevant because it emphasizes internationalization and research impact—two dimensions where strategic initiatives can deliver noticeable improvements over the medium term. Its transparency and methodological stability also enable institutions to design targeted policies aligned with specific performance indicators (Pedro et al., 2020). Although extensive literature discusses world-class university aspirations and global ranking systems, fewer studies explore how universities in resource-limited contexts construct and implement strategic transformation agendas. This research seeks to address that gap by analyzing the Institution's integrated policy framework for advancing toward world-class status. Its insights are applicable to emerging universities across developing regions facing similar constraints and ambitions (Triyono, 2025).

The relevance of this study extends beyond the case itself. First, it illustrates (Woodside, 2010) how ranking systems can serve as instruments for institutional transformation rather than mere evaluative tools. Second, it demonstrates how strategic planning that integrates regional competitiveness, internationalization, and research excellence can guide sustainable institutional development. Third, it offers empirical evidence that can inform policy debates about realistic pathways for universities in developing economies to compete globally. Finally, it sheds light on the inherent tensions and possible synergies between pursuing global ambitions and fulfilling local mandates—an issue at the heart of many regional universities striving for world-class recognition.

Method

To maintain appropriate professional distance and enable objective analysis while respecting institutional confidentiality, this study employs a pseudonymous reference system. The subject organization is referred to throughout as "the Institution," "the University," or "the

Organization." While the institution's actual identity might be inferred from contextual details, ranking positions, and publicly available data, this approach facilitates scholarly analysis focused on strategic frameworks, policy implications, and generalizable insights rather than evaluative judgment of the specific organization (Woodside, 2010). This methodological choice aligns with case study research traditions emphasizing analytical generalization—the derivation of theoretical insights applicable beyond the specific case—over statistical generalization or particularistic description. The analysis treats the Institution as an exemplar of regional universities in developing countries pursuing world-class status, examining strategic frameworks, implementation mechanisms, and transformation dynamics with relevance extending beyond the individual case (Palinkas et al., 2015).

This study employs a comprehensive policy analysis approach informed by case study methodology, integrating document analysis, strategic framework evaluation, and contextual assessment. The research design draws on policy analysis frameworks emphasizing context, content, process, and implementation dimensions in policy development and execution. The analytical approach is structured around three primary components: 1) Institutional Context Analysis: Comprehensive examination of the Institution's current positioning including organizational structure, academic capacity, research performance, internationalization profile, and competitive environment across local, national, and international levels; 2) Strategic Framework Analysis: Systematic evaluation of the policy document's strategic vision, objectives, strategic pillars, implementation mechanisms, and underlying strategic logic connecting interventions to intended outcomes (Pertti Alasuutari et al., 2008). The methodology adopts an interpretivist epistemology recognizing that strategic policy documents represent socially constructed organizational narratives rather than objective descriptions of institutional reality. Accordingly, the analysis attends to both explicit content and implicit assumptions, examining how the strategic framework constructs particular visions of institutional identity, aspiration, and transformation pathway while situating these constructions within broader discourses of world-class universities, global competitiveness, and ranking systems.

Results and Discussion

The concept of a world-class university has evolved from an aspirational ideal into a strategic imperative within the contemporary higher education landscape. Identifies three fundamental attributes that distinguish world-class universities: a concentration of talent encompassing exceptionally qualified faculty and students; abundant resources supporting

adequate infrastructure, equipment, research, and academic programs; and an enabling governance structure characterized by strategic management, a culture of excellence, and academic autonomy balanced with accountability (Gibran & Farhan, 2022).

Critical perspectives on the world-class university model emphasize the importance of balancing global standards with local relevance. For universities in developing countries such as Indonesia, this presents strategic challenges that require careful navigation—integrating global standards without neglecting national and regional responsibilities, and avoiding unrealistic aspirations that may divert attention from the institution’s regional development mission (Lee & Naidoo, 2020; Lo, 2014).

As a leading higher education institution in South Kalimantan, University A is strategically positioned to adopt the global university pathway, integrating global standards and networks with a substantive commitment to local and national development. This model is more aligned with the institutional context compared to the aspiration of becoming a global university operating primarily within the international sphere with minimal local orientation. This study analyzes University A reputation in its journey toward world-class university status across several key dimensions identified in the literature, including:

1. Quality and Concentration of Talent

World-class universities are characterized by their ability to attract and retain exceptional academic talent. Analysis of University A indicates systematic efforts in recruiting highly qualified faculty, increasing the proportion of doctoral-educated staff, and developing academic capacity-building programs. However, challenges remain in competing for top national and international talent, particularly given competition with universities in Java and other major higher education centers. On the student side, enhanced admission selectivity and the development of merit-based scholarship programs demonstrate a commitment to improving student input quality. The concentration of high-achieving students is a critical indicator in strengthening institutional academic reputation (Erisher et al., 2014).

2. Research Productivity and Excellence

The research dimension is crucial in building a world-class university reputation. Evaluation of University A research productivity includes analysis of publications in indexed international journals, citations, international research collaborations, and competitive research funding. The upward trend in international publications reflects positive momentum, although significant gaps remain compared with Indonesia’s leading research universities. The development of research centers of excellence based on Kalimantan’s local strengths—such as

wetland research, tropical biodiversity, and natural resources—offers strategic differentiation opportunities that can strengthen international reputation in specific niches.

3. Infrastructure and Institutional Resources

Substantial investment in physical infrastructure, laboratories, digital libraries, and learning technologies is a prerequisite for supporting world-class academic activities. Assessment of University A infrastructure reveals significant progress in facility modernization, though continuous investment remains a priority. Limited financial resources compared to universities in developed countries necessitate efficient allocation strategies focused on strategic priorities that deliver maximum reputational impact.

4. Strategic Governance and Global Network Engagement

Effective governance structures balancing academic autonomy with performance accountability are key determinants of successful transformation toward world-class university status. Analyses indicate ongoing governance reforms at University A, including the implementation of quality assurance systems, transparent management, and stricter performance evaluation mechanisms. The development of visionary academic leadership and professional managerial capacity remains an area of continuous improvement to effectively support the institution's strategic agenda.

Internationalization is a fundamental dimension of world-class universities. Evaluation of international partnerships, student and faculty mobility, internationalized curricula, and participation in global academic networks shows gradual progress in University A global engagement. However, the intensity and depth of international engagement need further enhancement through more substantive strategic partnerships with leading institutions, dual-degree programs, and cross-country research collaborations that produce high-quality outputs.

The distinctive characteristic of the global university pathway is its commitment to regional development while maintaining global academic standards. University A plays a strategic role in developing human resources in South Kalimantan and contributing to solutions for regional challenges. Achieving balance between global orientation and regional responsibility not only constitutes a unique institutional strength but also serves as a source of legitimacy within the local context, ultimately reinforcing its reputation as a relevant and impactful university.

Based on these four dimensions, the journey toward world-class university status presents multidimensional challenges requiring comprehensive strategic responses:

1. Key challenges include limited financial resources for long-term investment, intense competition for academic talent, gaps in research capacity compared to leading

universities, geographical barriers affecting institutional accessibility and attractiveness, and the complexity of managing diverse stakeholder expectations; and

2. Strategic opportunities include South Kalimantan's unique potential as a research laboratory for tropical environmental issues, wetlands, and sustainable development; strong regional government support for higher education development; a growing alumni network across sectors; and national momentum to enhance the competitiveness of Indonesian higher education (Koparak & Yüncü, 2019; Kuswati et al., 2025).

Effective implementation of ambitious strategic frameworks requires robust performance management systems that translate strategic objectives into operational activities while enabling monitoring, evaluation, and adaptive management. The literature identifies multiple dimensions of higher education performance management: strategic planning processes linking mission to measurable objectives, key performance indicator (KPI) systems tracking progress across multiple dimensions, performance-based resource allocation linking funding to results, accountability mechanisms ensuring transparency, and organizational learning systems enabling continuous improvement (Del-Castillo-Feito et al., 2019).

Balanced scorecard approaches adapted for higher education contexts emphasize multiple performance dimensions to avoid narrow focus on single indicators. Original framework—identifying financial, customer, internal process, and learning/growth perspectives—has been adapted to include dimensions such as academic quality, research impact, student success, financial sustainability, societal engagement, and organizational capacity. These multidimensional approaches recognize that universities serve diverse stakeholders with differing objectives, requiring balanced attention rather than optimizing one dimension at the expense of others (Del-Castillo-Feito et al., 2020; Sherrill, 2018).

However, critics highlight challenges in performance management implementation, including the proliferation of indicators that create administrative burdens and obscure priorities, measurement difficulties for qualitative aspects of academic work such as teaching quality and scholarly significance, risks of gaming and unintended consequences in which actors optimize measured indicators at the expense of unmeasured goals, and tensions between quantitative assessment cultures and academic traditions emphasizing peer review and qualitative judgment (Liu & Cheng, 2005; Lo, 2014).

For institutions pursuing world-class status through ranking advancement, performance management systems must balance multiple tensions: short-term indicators tracking implementation progress with long-term outcome measures reflecting strategic objectives; institutional-level metrics with unit and individual performance indicators supporting

accountability; quantitative indicators with qualitative assessments capturing dimensions resistant to quantification; internal accountability requirements with external reporting obligations; and performance measurement with formative assessment supporting improvement (Asiedu et al., 2022).

Effective performance management requires not only indicator systems but also organizational cultures and practices that use performance information for decision-making, resource allocation, and continuous improvement—rather than treating measurement merely as a bureaucratic compliance exercise. This involves leadership engagement with performance data, transparent communication of results, systematic reflection processes, capacity building for data-informed decision-making, and aligning incentives with strategic priorities.

Conclusion

The reputation of University A in its journey toward world-class university status reflects the complex dynamics between global aspirations and local realities. The institution has demonstrated significant progress across various dimensions relevant to world-class university status, yet continues to face substantial challenges requiring long-term commitment and coherent strategies. The global university pathway—balancing international standards with regional commitments—offers a more realistic and sustainable model compared to aspirations of becoming a globally oriented university detached from its local context. This model enables University A to build a reputation as an academically excellent, regionally relevant, and globally recognized institution in specific areas of strength. The success of this reputational transformation will depend on consistent strategy implementation, adequate resource commitment, visionary leadership, and sustained stakeholder support. With the right approach, University A has the potential to become a world-class university model with strong Indonesian characteristics, contributing not only to global scientific advancement but also to sustainable regional and national development.

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