



## SERBIAN UNIVERSITIES IN GLOBAL RANKINGS: CURRENT SITUATION AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADVANCEMENT<sup>1</sup>

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UDC  
378:  
001.895:  
005.6(497.11)

Original  
scientific  
paper

Received:  
27.05.2025  
Accepted:  
29.06.2025

**Abstract:** Higher education, as the highest level of formal education, plays a crucial role in the social, economic, cultural, and technological development of a nation. In the context of intense global competition, the quality and competitiveness of universities are increasingly evaluated based on their positions in international university rankings. Although these rankings are often subjected to criticism, their influence on academic, political, and societal perceptions of universities is undeniable. This paper analyzes the positions of the four largest public universities in the Republic of Serbia across several major global university ranking systems. It also identifies the key challenges contributing to the lower rankings of Serbian universities and proposes targeted measures to enhance their international visibility, academic reputation, and overall competitiveness.

**Keywords:** higher education, Serbian universities, global university rankings, ARWU (Shanghai Ranking), QS World University Rankings, THE World University Rankings, Webometrics Ranking, improvement strategies

**JEL classification:** I23, I28

### 1. Introduction

In recent decades, the positions of universities in global rankings have become increasingly important indicators of institutional quality and impact. These rankings, which incorporate both quantitative and qualitative measures, such as academic performance, research output, international collaboration, and overall influence, play a key role in shaping educational policies and strategic development

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The paper is a result of research based on the Agreement (number 451-03-137/2025-03) signed in 2025 by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia and the Faculty of Economics, University of Niš.

at higher education institutions worldwide. Universities no longer operate solely within national boundaries; instead, they are increasingly engaged in global competition to attract talented students, researchers, international partners, and financial resources.

Within this context, it is especially important to examine the positions of universities from the Republic of Serbia in the most prominent global ranking systems. The aim of this paper is to present an overview of Serbia's higher education sector, analyze the methodologies and criteria used by leading ranking systems, and highlight the current positions of the four largest public universities in Serbia. Special attention is given to identifying the key challenges that contribute to their relatively lower rankings, as well as to exploring opportunities for improving their international visibility, academic reputation, and competitiveness.

The structure of the paper reflects these objectives: following the introduction, the main features of Serbia's higher education system are discussed, followed by an analysis of the four dominant global university ranking systems and the positions held by Serbian universities. The paper then outlines the major challenges these institutions face and proposes concrete measures to support their advancement on the international academic stage.

## **2. Higher education in the Republic of Serbia**

Higher or tertiary education represents the highest level of formal education, encompassing academic and vocational study programs offered by institutions such as universities, faculties, colleges, and academies of applied studies (World Bank Group, 2022). The European Commission defines the higher education sector as comprising "all universities, colleges of technology and other institutions providing formal tertiary education programmes, whatever their source of financial or legal status, and all research institutes, centres, experimental stations and clinics that have their R&D activities under the direct control of, or administered by, tertiary education institutions" (European Commission, 2021). This sector has a significant impact on society, the economy, and culture (Scott, 2010), and is widely recognized as a key driver of national progress and development (Telu & Potnuru, 2024; Hințea, 2024; Profiroiu & Briscariu, 2021; Trinh, 2022).

Higher education plays a multifaceted role in contemporary societies: from educating and training professionals for the labor market to developing scientific research capacity and fostering critical thinking, social responsibility, and innovation. In this sense, it is not merely an educational resource, but a strategic national asset. Universities function as centers of knowledge and research, as well as custodians of cultural heritage and national identity. Educated professionals contribute to social advancement through science, innovation, enhanced economic competitiveness, democratic engagement, and the promotion of social mobility. As

Professor Duško Vejnović observes: “Higher education, as the foundation of an individual’s intellectual and moral development, plays a crucial role in shaping a nation’s healthy national consciousness. It is not merely a process of transferring knowledge and skills, but also a process of building critical thinking, understanding the world, and one’s place within it. During the educational process, young people not only acquire knowledge but also develop the ability to analyze, synthesize, critically evaluate information, and form their own perspectives on the world. This process is of immeasurable importance for the development of a healthy national consciousness, one that is not based on dogma and prejudice, but on an understanding of one’s own history, culture, and identity, alongside respect and tolerance for others” (Vejnović, 2024).

In the Republic of Serbia, higher education is regulated by the Law on Higher Education. According to this law, higher education is delivered through the following types of institutions (Službeni glasnik RS, 2018):

- Universities,
- Faculties, including academies of arts within universities,
- Academies of applied studies,
- Colleges,
- Colleges of applied studies.

A World Bank report notes that Serbia’s higher education system is dominated by four public universities (the University of Belgrade, the University of Novi Sad, the University of Niš, and the University of Kragujevac), which together comprise 72 faculties. These institutions enroll approximately 70% of all students in tertiary education in Serbia and conduct the majority of scientific research in the country (World Bank Group, 2022).

### **3. Positions of Serbian universities on global university rankings**

In today’s global economy, international university rankings have become “an established part of the global higher education landscape” (Gadd et al., 2021), serving as valuable tools for evaluating institutional performance, academic quality, potential, and both global and national competitiveness (Pavel, 2015). In addition to facilitating comparisons among universities through standardized indicators, these rankings provide useful insights to students, researchers, policymakers, and employers regarding the quality and reputation of higher education institutions. Moreover, they encourage universities to improve quality, promote internationalization, and strategically position themselves within the global academic environment.

Global university rankings vary in the indicators they use, the weight assigned to each indicator, the sources of data, and the overall purpose of the ranking.

Among the most widely recognized international rankings are: the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), commonly known as the Shanghai Ranking; the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings; the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings; and the Webometrics Ranking of World Universities.

*The Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)* was first published in 2003 by the Center for World-Class Universities at Shanghai Jiao Tong University (China). Since 2009, it has been maintained by the independent organization ShanghaiRanking Consultancy, which specializes in higher education analytics.

ARWU ranks universities based on six objective indicators: the number of alumni and staff who have received Nobel Prizes or Fields Medals; the number of highly cited researchers (as identified by Clarivate); the number of articles published in prestigious journals such as *Nature* and *Science*; the volume of publications indexed in the Science Citation Index Expanded and the Social Sciences Citation Index (Web of Science); and the institution's per capita academic performance. Each year, more than 2,500 universities are evaluated, and the top 1,000 are publicly ranked (Shanghai Ranking, 2024).

According to 2024 data, two public universities from the Republic of Serbia are included in the top 1,000. The highest-ranked is the University of Belgrade, placed in the 401-500 range, followed by the University of Novi Sad, which appears in the 901-1,000 range (Shanghai Ranking, 2024).

*The Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings* are compiled by the British company Quacquarelli Symonds and have been published annually since 2004. Between 2004 and 2009, these rankings were produced in collaboration with Times Higher Education under the joint title Times Higher Education - QS World University Rankings. In 2010, the partnership ended, after which QS began publishing the rankings independently using a proprietary methodology. Simultaneously, Times Higher Education launched a new ranking system in cooperation with Thomson Reuters. Today, QS produces both global and regional rankings, each differing in the applied criteria and their respective weightings (Pavel, 2015).

The QS methodology evaluates more than 1,500 universities across five broad dimensions, based on nine indicators: Research & Discovery (Academic Reputation, Citations per Faculty); Learning Experience (Faculty/Student Ratio); Employability (Employer Reputation, Employment Outcomes); Global Engagement (International Student Ratio, International Research Network, International Faculty Ratio); and Sustainability (Sustainability Score) (QS World University Rankings, 2025).

The most recent data show that all four major public universities in the Republic of Serbia are included in the QS World University Rankings. The

University of Belgrade holds the highest position, ranked in the 731-740 band, followed by the University of Novi Sad (1001-1200), while the University of Niš and the University of Kragujevac are placed in the 1201-1400 range (QS World University Rankings, 2025).

*The Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings*, launched in 2004, aim to provide a comprehensive assessment of the world's top-performing universities (Times Higher Education, 2024a). The 2025 edition evaluates over 2,000 universities from 115 countries and territories (Times Higher Education, 2024). Widely regarded as one of the most comprehensive global performance assessments, the updated WUR 3.0 methodology employs 18 carefully selected indicators grouped into five key pillars: Teaching (Teaching Reputation, Student-Staff Ratio, Doctorate-to-Bachelor Ratio, Doctorate-to-Academic Staff Ratio, Institutional Income); Research Environment (Research Reputation, Research Income, Research Productivity); Research Quality (Citation Impact, Research Strength, Research Excellence, Research Influence); International Outlook (International Students, International Staff, International Co-authorship, Study Abroad<sup>2</sup>); and Industry (Industry Income, Patents) (Times Higher Education, 2024; 2024a).

According to the latest data, three public universities from the Republic of Serbia are included in the THE rankings. The University of Belgrade and the University of Kragujevac are both ranked in the 1001-1200 band, while the University of Novi Sad is positioned in the 1501+ range (Times Higher Education, 2024).

*The Webometrics Ranking of World Universities*, also known as the Ranking Web of Universities, or simply Webometrics, has been published since 2004 with the primary aim of promoting open access to knowledge generated by universities (Aguillo, 2025). The ranking is updated biannually, with data collection conducted in January and July. Its methodology is independent, transparent, and grounded in scientific principles. Webometrics primarily evaluates indicators related to universities' digital presence, including both the quantity and quality of openly accessible scholarly content (Webometrics Ranking, 2024).

The January 2025 edition includes nearly 32,000 higher education institutions worldwide (Aguillo, 2025). According to the most recent data, Serbian universities occupy varied positions in the ranking. The University of Belgrade is ranked highest (427th), followed by the University of Novi Sad (767th), the University of Niš (1507th), and the University of Kragujevac (1678th) (Aguillo, 2025).

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<sup>2</sup> "This metric is not used in the calculation for this year's ranking" (Times Higher Education, 2024a).

#### **4. Current challenges for Serbian universities**

Universities in Serbia encounter a set of complex and interrelated challenges that constrain their development, international visibility, and competitiveness within the global higher education landscape. Their direct exposure to economic, technological, and political influences (Kolarski, 2021, p. 74) contributes to persistent financial, regulatory, administrative, digital, and other systemic obstacles (Simendić et al., 2018; Žarkić Joksimović et al., 2013; Đorić, 2023; World Bank Group, 2022; Službeni glasnik RS, 2021). Understanding and analyzing these challenges constitutes a crucial step toward formulating effective measures to enhance the status of Serbian universities, both nationally and internationally.

One of the most pressing issues faced by the universities in Serbia is the lack of adequate and stable funding (Varađanin, 2017; Žarkić Joksimović et al., 2013; Simendić et al., 2018; Đorić, 2023; World Bank Group, 2022). Although the state formally supports higher education, public expenditures on science, research, and development remain well below the European Union average (Grošin, 2021; Žarkić Joksimović et al., 2013; Službeni glasnik RS, 2021). The limited number of competitive research projects, insufficient funding for laboratories, infrastructure, and academic publishing, as well as the complex procedures for applying to international grants, further hinder the development of academic capacity.

Inadequate investment also directly affects the ability of institutions to employ young researchers, procure modern equipment, access relevant databases, and participate in international conferences, all of which collectively undermine the universities' research output, a key metric in global university rankings.

Another critical issue within the Serbian higher education system is the frequent amendment of legislation regulating the sector. These changes are often introduced without adequate public or expert consultation and may have far-reaching negative consequences for higher education institutions and society at large (Rektor Univerziteta u Beogradu, 2024).

For example, the Law on Higher Education, which serves as the fundamental legal framework for higher education in the Republic of Serbia (Službeni glasnik RS, 2005), has undergone revisions and changes nearly every year (Službeni glasnik RS, 2017; 2025). Such legal instability undermines predictability and legal certainty, both essential for long-term institutional progress.

A particularly detrimental recent regulatory development expected to negatively affect the global ranking performance of Serbian universities is the amended Regulation on norms and standards for working conditions at universities and faculties for activities financed from the state budget, adopted by the Government of the Republic of Serbia on March 24, 2025 (Službeni glasnik RS, 2025). This regulation substantially alters the allocation of academic staff workload within the standard 40-hour workweek. The previously balanced division of 20

hours for research and 20 hours for teaching has been drastically changed to 35 hours for teaching and only 5 hours for research.

These changes have been publicly criticized by numerous stakeholders, including the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU), which noted that the changes were adopted “without adequate expert and public consultation, and without the involvement of all relevant bodies in the field of higher education, by a government whose mandate had already expired.” SANU further emphasized that the amendments “disrupt the long-standing organization of higher education in our society and introduce standards and norms not characteristic of reputable universities, but rather more appropriate for colleges and vocational schools.” According to SANU, the changes will have “multiple direct negative consequences for higher education, university teachers and teaching assistants, as well as both direct and indirect financial repercussions for faculties and society as a whole” (Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, 2025).

Additional barriers to the modernization of higher education include a lack of flexibility in university governance, centralized decision-making processes, and weak links to the labor market and industry.

Moreover, limited digital infrastructure and an underdeveloped online presence (Službeni glasnik RS, 2021) adversely affect university rankings. Many higher education institutions in Serbia still lack robust digital platforms, knowledge repositories, and online services, thereby reducing their digital visibility and global competitiveness (Kolarski, 2022; Kupusinac, 2018).

The Strategy for the Development of Education in the Republic of Serbia until 2030 also points to systemic weaknesses in data monitoring: “Official statistics do not allow for adequate assessment of quantitative indicators in higher education... The underdevelopment of monitoring indicators is correlated with the absence of implementation of key measures to improve access, quality, relevance, and efficiency in higher education... This underdevelopment and weakness of national statistics, which neither cover nor track the most important indicators of quality, access, relevance, and efficiency in higher education, is alarming and points to a range of problems that exist in higher education and to the persistent lack of transparency in the system” (Službeni glasnik RS, 2021).

## **5. Opportunities for advancement in global university rankings**

Paul Şerban Agachi observes that “rankings do show where the university is, in comparison to others, but do not show how they can reach higher positions in the league tables” (Agachi, 2017). He further emphasizes that genuine academic quality comprises “good professors, good students, good research, good teaching and research equipment, good research and administrative staff, and a general climate that stimulates development and innovation” (Agachi, 2017).

Balaji N. G. and Hemantha Kumar G. H. offer a more focused perspective by identifying a wide range of opportunities that universities can harness to improve their position in global university rankings. The authors propose several measures (Balaji & Hemantha Kumar, 2024), including:

- Enhancing research output: Increasing the volume of high-impact research, promoting international co-authorship, and engaging in collaborative research projects with other institutions.
- Improving teaching quality: Implementing innovative teaching methodologies and fostering active student engagement.
- Promoting international collaboration: Strengthening ties with universities, research institutes, and industry partners worldwide.
- Upgrading infrastructure and facilities: Investing in state-of-the-art teaching and research facilities to attract top talent and improve institutional performance.
- Fostering innovation and entrepreneurship: Encouraging entrepreneurial thinking and innovation as key pillars of institutional identity.
- Building institutional reputation and brand: Developing strong communication strategies and branding to enhance institutional visibility and global recognition.
- Maintaining an academic profile: Creating and updating academic staff profiles on international platforms, using institutional email addresses to boost visibility and citation metrics.

When it comes to universities in the Republic of Serbia, despite the considerable challenges they face, it is essential that they actively pursue available opportunities for enhancing their global ranking positions. Parallel to overcoming systemic barriers, institutions should implement targeted actions such as (Agachi, 2017; Balaji & Hemantha Kumar, 2024; Khoury et al., 2025; Goodall, 2013; Dachyar & Dewi, 2015; Službeni glasnik RS, 2021):

- Strengthening research output and scientific capacity: This includes encouraging the publication of research in leading international journals (e.g., those indexed in Scopus and Web of Science); establishing institutional support structures for research activities (e.g., project support offices, proofreading services); introducing mandatory training in academic writing, research methodology, and ethics at graduate and postgraduate levels; creating incentives and reward systems for high-quality research; and investing in research infrastructure and digital databases.
- Supporting internationalization and academic mobility: Increasing the number of international students and visiting scholars; expanding the offering of study programs in English; promoting participation in international mobility programs; strengthening involvement in international networks and consortia (e.g., CEEPUS, UNICA), academic associations (e.g., EUA, IAU), and

platforms (such as QS Hub and THE); and improving institutional profiles on academic platforms (e.g., ResearchGate, Academia.edu, LinkedIn, ORCID).

- Developing and promoting a distinct university brand: Defining clear areas of academic expertise; building a recognizable visual identity; enhancing visibility through media, scientific conferences, social media, and alumni engagement; participating more actively in international academic bodies and industry partnerships; and leveraging digital tools to promote achievements and institutional strengths.
- Modernizing academic programs: Aligning curricula with contemporary knowledge trends and labor market needs; offering more programs in English, especially at the graduate level; developing interdisciplinary programs; and fostering stronger ties with industry through internships, joint projects, and visiting professionals.
- Implementing digital transformation and boosting online visibility: Regularly updating institutional websites in both Serbian and English; ensuring open access to scientific publications; promoting researcher profiles via Scopus, ORCID, and similar platforms; enhancing presence on academic social media; and digitizing teaching and learning processes.
- Improving governance and administrative efficiency: Professionalizing university management (while preserving academic autonomy); digitizing administrative procedures; ensuring transparency in decision-making; adopting long-term development strategies at both university and faculty levels; and defining measurable goals related to institutional quality and international rankings.

The successful implementation of these measures requires a more proactive and strategic approach by the state. Establishing a stable, predictable, and supportive economic, legal, and political environment is critical for creating the conditions necessary for universities to succeed. The state must recognize higher education as a long-term investment, one that is essential to the social, economic, technological, and cultural advancement of the country.

## **6. Conclusion**

The position of Serbian universities in global rankings reflects a complex interplay of systemic, financial, legal, and institutional challenges. Despite persistent limitations, including insufficient and unstable funding, frequent legislative changes, limited international visibility, and an underdeveloped research infrastructure, concrete and attainable measures exist to improve their ranking. Universities must actively pursue internationalization, invest in the research quality, and strategically enhance their academic and digital presence.

However, sustained progress depends on broader systemic support. It is essential that the state recognizes universities as strategic assets for national development and provides a stable, predictable, and supportive environment for higher education. Through coordinated efforts at both the institutional and governmental levels, Serbian universities can not only improve their position in global rankings but also more effectively fulfill their educational, social, and developmental missions.

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## UNIVERZITETI U SRBIJI NA GLOBALNIM RANG LISTAMA: TRENUTNA SITUACIJA I MOGUĆNOSTI NAPREDOVANJA

**Apstrakt:** Cilj rada je da se analiziraju pozicije četiri najveća javna univerziteta u Srbiji na vodećim svetskim rang-listama (ARWU, QS, THE, *Webometrics*), identifikuju uzroci njihovog nižeg plasmana i predlože mere za unapređenje. Metodološki, rad se oslanja na komparativnu analizu kriterijuma rangiranja i položaja univerziteta, uz oslonac na aktuelne podatke iz međunarodnih izvora i domaćih strategijskih dokumenata. Rezultati pokazuju da se srpski univerziteti, uprkos dugoj tradiciji, suočavaju sa ograničenjima poput nedovoljnog finansiranja, nestabilnog zakonodavstva, skromne međunarodne saradnje i digitalne nevidljivosti. Praktična vrednost rada ogleda se u konkretnim preporukama za unapređenje naučne produkcije, internacionalizacije, digitalne transformacije i institucionalnog brendiranja. Originalnost istraživanja je u sistematičnom sagledavanju više rang-lista u kontekstu srpskog obrazovnog sistema, dok je njegov značaj u tome što nudi primenljive smernice za donosiocel politika, menadžment univerziteta i širu akademsku zajednicu u cilju jačanja konkurentnosti srpskih univerziteta na globalnom nivou.

**Ključne reči:** visoko obrazovanje, univerziteti u Srbiji, globalne rang-liste univerziteta, ARWU (Šangajska lista), QS rang-lista svetskih univerziteta, THE rang-lista svetskih univerziteta, *Webometrics* rang-lista, strategije unapređenja.

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**Ivana Simić** is a Full Professor at the Faculty of Economics, University of Niš, where she teaches a variety of management and organization-related courses at all study levels, including Fundamentals of Management, Management of Organizational Change, and Management of Organizational Behavior. Her research interests cover a broad range of topics, including entrepreneurship, intrapreneurship, digital transformation, personality traits, talent management, and algorithmic management, among others. In her academic career, she has authored or co-authored eight university textbooks and monographs, and published numerous scientific papers. She has also actively participated in 11 scientific research projects.