



Reframing World-Class University Theory in a Resource-Constrained Public University: Internal Stakeholders' Lived Experiences in Navigating Global University Rankings

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Abstract

Global university rankings have become influential instruments that shape institutional agendas, governance, and definitions of quality in higher education. The World-Class University (WCU) Theory identifies research output, internationalization, and worldwide renown as fundamental indices of greatness. However, growing evidence suggests these measures offer a narrow and contested view of institutional quality. This research used a transcendental phenomenological methodology to investigate the lived experiences of internal university stakeholders in a Philippine public university functioning under fiscal constraints while adapting to ranking-driven changes. The study gathered data through comprehensive, semi-structured interviews, supplemented by reflective journaling and institutional documentation, and analyzed them using Moustakas' phenomenological approach. Research indicates that institutional procedures are increasingly aligning with global ranking criteria, leading to heightened research activity, data-informed governance, and purposeful internationalization. Nonetheless, stakeholders face significant financial and organizational constraints, increased professional demands, and differing interpretations of excellence based on pedagogy, accessibility, and social significance. These findings advance World-Class University Theory by demonstrating how stakeholders at resource-constrained public universities balance global ranking pressures with commitments to teaching quality, accessibility, and social relevance. The results indicate that institutional excellence encompasses not only research productivity and international visibility but also context-sensitive missions and public service obligations.

Keywords: *World-Class University Theory 1, Higher Education Quality 2, Global University Rankings 3, Internationalization 4, Institutional Responses 5*

INTRODUCTION

World-Class University (WCU) Theory, as articulated by Altbach (2004) and Salmi (2009), conceptualizes institutional excellence through characteristics such as research productivity, internationalization, global visibility, talent concentration, and adequate resource capacity. While the theory has significantly influenced higher education policy and ranking systems, critics contend that it favors research-intensive, well-resourced institutions while overlooking contextual realities, social missions, and diverse institutional objectives.

Despite these criticisms, research on how internal university stakeholders experience and interpret ranking-driven reforms linked to WCU aspirations remains limited. Examining these experiences is essential, as stakeholders implement institutional responses to rankings while managing resource constraints, public mandates, and organizational complexities. This study investigates the lived experiences of internal university stakeholders at a Philippine public university. It analyzes how these experiences support, challenge, or extend the assumptions underlying World-Class University Theory.

The increasing impact of rankings has transformed institutional conduct. Rankings not only assess excellence but also actively reorganize institutions, shaping decision-making, policy trajectories, and academic agendas (Adam, 2023; Brankovic et al., 2023). This transition is often

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motivated by rivalry for prestige, financial resources, and international prominence ([Khan et al., 2020](#)).

A growing mass of research underscores the constraints and biases inherent in ranking algorithms. Rankings have faced criticism for methodological deficiencies, reputational bias, and geographic disparities ([Bellantuono et al., 2022](#); [Safón & Docampo, 2020](#)). Furthermore, they often prioritize research-intensive outcomes while inadequately portraying instructional quality, social impact, and diversity ([Hauptman Komotar, 2020](#)).

Most existing research emphasizes ranking methodologies, policy effects, and institutional strategies, with less attention to the lived experiences of internal university stakeholders who implement these reforms in daily institutional work. This gap is significant because stakeholders actively interpret, negotiate, adapt, and sometimes resist global metrics while upholding institutional mission and public value. The present study addresses this gap by reframing the concept of world-class universities through the experiences of internal university stakeholders navigating world university rankings.

The lived experiences of internal university stakeholders are essential in this setting. These players implement ranking-driven changes and manage the conflicts between global aspirations and institutional reality. Nonetheless, the literature has examined these viewpoints inadequately. This research fills this gap by analyzing stakeholders' lived experiences of navigating global university rankings and using these experiences to critically reassess World-Class University Theory.

LITERATURE REVIEW

World-Class University Theory and the Pursuit of Excellence

World-Class University (WCU) Theory has emerged as a leading framework for analyzing institutional excellence in higher education. The concept gained prominence through the work of [Altbach \(2004\)](#) and [Salmi \(2009\)](#), who identified world-class universities as institutions characterized by exceptional research productivity, international visibility, highly qualified faculty and students, effective governance structures, and substantial financial resources.

[Salmi \(2009\)](#) further asserts that three core characteristics define world-class status: concentration of talent, abundance of resources, and favorable governance. These attributes are considered essential for universities to compete effectively in the global knowledge economy and attain international recognition.

The increasing impact of globalization has amplified the appeal of the world-class university model. Governments and higher education institutions now regard world-class status as a means of enhancing national competitiveness, driving economic development, fostering innovation, and achieving international prestige.

In response, universities worldwide have implemented policies and strategies to strengthen research productivity, expand international partnerships, increase institutional visibility, and improve their positions in global ranking systems. Consequently, WCU Theory is now closely linked to prevailing definitions of quality, excellence, and institutional success in higher education.

The literature identifies four principal assumptions underlying World-Class University Theory: (1) research productivity is a primary indicator of institutional excellence; (2) internationalization demonstrates institutional quality and competitiveness; (3) global visibility and reputation indicate academic success; and (4) sufficient financial and organizational resources are essential for attaining world-class status. These assumptions have significantly shaped global ranking systems and institutional strategies, although their relevance across varied institutional contexts is still debated.

Critiques of the World-Class University Ideal

Although World-Class University Theory has exerted significant influence, it has also attracted substantial scholarly criticism. Critics argue that the framework advances a narrow, standardized conception of excellence by prioritizing research productivity, citation impact, internationalization, and institutional reputation while comparatively neglecting teaching quality, social responsibility, accessibility, and community engagement (Hazelkorn & Gibson, 2017; Hauptman Komotar, 2020). As a result, universities may prioritize internationally recognized indicators over their distinctive institutional missions and local contexts.

Another criticism concerns the theory's implicit assumption that all institutions operate under relatively comparable conditions. Scholars observe that the world-class model typically mirrors the characteristics of highly resourced universities in developed countries, thereby disadvantaging institutions in developing or resource-constrained contexts (Marginson, 2016; Hazelkorn & Mihut, 2021).

Universities with limited funding, large student populations, and strong public service mandates may thus face structural disadvantages when assessed against standards tailored to elite research-intensive institutions. It is argued that the world-class university discourse contributes to the global homogenization of higher education by encouraging institutions to emulate a single model of excellence.

Such pressures may overlook institutional diversity and diminish alternative conceptions of quality that emphasize social relevance, inclusivity, equity, and nation-building. These criticisms suggest that the assumptions embedded within WCU Theory warrant further examination, particularly through the experiences of those directly involved in implementing ranking-driven institutional reforms.

Global University Rankings as the Operationalization of World-Class University Theory

Global university rankings have become key tools for translating the ideals of World-Class University Theory into measurable indicators of institutional performance. Systems such as the QS World University Rankings, Times Higher Education (THE), the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), and the World University Rankings for Innovation (WURI) assess universities using criteria such as research productivity, citation impact, internationalization, academic reputation, employer reputation, and global visibility. These criteria closely reflect the characteristics that WCU Theory identifies as essential for institutional excellence.

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As rankings gain influence, they shape institutional decision-making, governance, and quality assurance. Hazelkorn & Mihut (2021) note that rankings now serve not only as evaluative tools but also as governance mechanisms, influencing how universities define and pursue quality. Brankovic et al. (2023) similarly argue that rankings drive institutions to align policies, strategies, and performance measures with external standards of excellence.

Scholars have increasingly criticized global rankings for reducing the multidimensional nature of higher education quality to measurable and comparable indicators. Hauptman Komotar (2020) contends that rankings generate dominant discourses of quality that privilege research,

reputation, and international visibility over context-sensitive educational purposes. [Hazelkorn & Mihut \(2021\)](#) similarly emphasize that rankings shape institutional priorities by encouraging alignment with externally defined measures of excellence.

[Selten et al. \(2020\)](#) show that ranking systems are closely tied to research output and reputation, raising concerns about whether rankings genuinely assess holistic institutional quality. Collectively, these critiques indicate that rankings function not only as evaluative tools but also as governance mechanisms that influence how universities define, pursue, and demonstrate quality.

The methodological and structural limitations of rankings are particularly significant for universities in developing and resource-constrained contexts. [Ali \(2022\)](#), [Khan et al. \(2020\)](#), and [Ansari and McCoy \(2023\)](#) observe that ranking systems often favor well-resourced institutions with robust research infrastructure, established global networks, and greater access to international publication systems.

Consequently, universities in the Global South may perceive rankings as both aspirational and burdensome. While rankings can stimulate institutional improvement, they may also intensify pressures to conform to standards that do not fully reflect local mandates, public service roles, or developmental priorities.

In response, universities increasingly recalibrate their quality assurance systems, strategic plans, research policies, and internationalization initiatives. Studies by [Kayyali \(2022\)](#), [Wang and Shih \(2023\)](#), and [Ngoc and Tien \(2022\)](#) indicate that ranking participation often leads institutions to strengthen data systems, increase publication targets, expand international partnerships, improve documentation practices, and align internal performance indicators with global ranking metrics. These reforms show that rankings are no longer merely external reference points; they are now embedded in institutional planning, monitoring, and evaluation processes.

Ranking-driven reforms also reshape the responsibilities of internal university stakeholders. Faculty members, quality assurance personnel, planning officers, research administrators, international affairs officers, and data managers are frequently tasked with translating global indicators into institutional practices.

The literature indicates that this work may involve increased documentation, data validation, research monitoring, coordination across offices, and heightened pressure to demonstrate measurable outcomes. [Dagdag and Daracan \(2025\)](#), [Bayanbayeva \(2025\)](#), and [Ehtiwesh and Maousa \(2023\)](#) suggest that such reforms may add workload, increase compliance pressure, and expand roles, even as they enhance institutional visibility and performance.

Institutional Responses and the Experiences of Internal Stakeholders

In pursuit of world-class status, universities are increasingly shaped by ranking-driven reforms that influence institutional planning, quality assurance, research management, and internationalization strategies. Empirical studies demonstrate that participation in global rankings prompts institutions to enhance data systems, raise publication targets, expand international collaborations, and align internal performance indicators with ranking metrics ([Kayyali, 2022](#); [Wang & Shih, 2023](#)). Although scholars often analyze these reforms at the institutional level, the experiences of internal stakeholders tasked with implementing them have received comparatively less attention.

Internal stakeholders, such as quality assurance coordinators, planning officers, research administrators, internationalization officers, and data managers, are central to translating ranking indicators into institutional practices. Research indicates that these individuals frequently encounter increased workloads, expanded responsibilities, greater accountability, and tensions between institutional missions and ranking requirements ([Dagdag & Daracan, 2025](#); [Bayanbayeva, 2025](#); [Ehtiwesh & Maousa, 2023](#)). Analyzing these stakeholders' experiences offers important

insights into how universities interpret, negotiate, and enact ranking-driven reforms.

Philippine Public Universities and Contextual Realities

In the Philippine context, these dynamics intersect with national higher education priorities. The CHED A.C.H.I.E.V.E. Agenda 2030 emphasizes accessible lifelong learning, SDG-based research and innovation, data-driven governance, impact-driven internationalization, institutional policy reform, and efficient public service.

While these priorities align with global ranking-related reforms, they also situate internationalization and quality assurance within the frameworks of inclusivity, public value, and national development. This distinction is significant because Philippine public universities are expected not only to compete for global prestige but also to fulfill social mandates related to access, equity, employability, community engagement, and nation-building.

Research Gap and Conceptual Positioning

Although extensive scholarship examines global rankings and institutional responses, few studies have investigated how internal university stakeholders experience ranking-driven reforms in resource-constrained public universities. Furthermore, stakeholder experiences are seldom employed as an empirical lens to evaluate the assumptions underlying World-Class University Theory. As a result, understanding remains limited on whether prevailing conceptions of excellence accurately reflect the realities faced by institutions operating under financial constraints while fulfilling public mandates for accessibility, equity, and nation-building.

However, scholars have raised concerns about the methodological limitations and unintended consequences of ranking systems. Research highlights issues such as reputational bias, disciplinary imbalances, and an overemphasis on research outputs at the expense of teaching quality and social impact (Bellantuono et al., 2022; Safón & Docampo, 2020). These concerns have led to ongoing debates about whether rankings truly reflect the multidimensional nature of institutional quality.

While existing scholarship has extensively examined global university rankings, institutional strategies, and policy responses related to pursuing world-class status, limited research has investigated how internal university stakeholders experience and interpret ranking-driven reforms in resource-constrained public universities. Furthermore, few studies have utilized stakeholder experiences as empirical evidence to interrogate the assumptions underlying World-Class University Theory.

This research gap is particularly pronounced in developing-country contexts, where institutions must balance the pursuit of global visibility with public mandates concerning accessibility, equity, and nation-building. To address this gap, the present study investigates the lived experiences of internal university stakeholders. It analyzes how these experiences support, challenge, or extend the prevailing assumptions of World-Class University Theory.

RESEARCH METHOD

Participants and Inclusion Criteria

The study included seven internal university stakeholders selected for their direct roles in quality assurance, institutional planning, research management, data governance, internationalization, and global ranking initiatives. Purposive sampling ensured participants had firsthand experience with institutional responses to global university rankings.

To be included in the study, participants were required to: (1) occupy a leadership, managerial, or coordinating role related to institutional quality assurance, planning, research, internationalization, or data management; (2) have direct involvement in ranking-related

initiatives, data submissions, or strategic institutional responses; (3) possess at least two years of experience in their current role; and (4) voluntarily consent to participate in the study. Participants represented key university offices involved in ranking-related activities and offered diverse, complementary perspectives on institutional responses to global university rankings.

Table 1. Participant Profile Table

Participant	Involvement in Global Ranking	Experience in QA influenced by global ranking metrics	Held tasks related to global ranking	Length of service	Quality Assurance Participation	Willingness to Participate
P1	Technological initiatives	Implemented smart classrooms, software and network infrastructure	Smart classrooms, software infrastructure, internet/access-point and structured-cabling support	2 years	Director, Information and Communication Technology Office (ICTO)	Yes
P2	Former Dean, College of Science; BS Nutrition and Dietetics was among programs involved in QS-related activities	Student-satisfaction and employability surveys	Surveys related to student satisfaction and employability	8 years	Former Dean; led a college with Level 4 accredited programs	Yes
P3	Responsible for university planning, monitoring, and evaluation of accomplishments	Ensures institutional goals and targets are monitored and accomplished	Data collection, data analysis, and interpretation relevant to university rankings	10 years	Director, Institutional Planning Office (IPO); faculty designee of a Level 4 accredited program	Yes
P4	Monitors research policies, incentives, publications, citations, and internally/externally funded research initiatives	Recommends plans, programs, projects, and policies related to research planning and programs	Research output, publications, citations, research linkages and related monitoring	15 years	Director, Research Management Office (RMO); faculty designee of a Level 4 accredited program	Yes
P5	Mediates between the university and respondents such as students, faculty, alumni and employers	Data gathering and interpretation	Tracer study, socioeconomic survey, faculty-evaluation survey and respondent-list management	4 years	Director, Institute for Data and Statistical Analysis (IDSA); faculty designee of a Level 4 accredited program	Yes
P6	Initiated QS rating, WURI and THE applications; office served as head secretariat for international rankings	Attended CHED exhibits/summits and ranking-related training; oversees internationalization and ranking requirements	Coordinates ranking submissions, partnerships/linkages, extension study programs and special internationalization projects	5 years	Director, International Affairs Office (IAO); head secretariat for international ranking submissions	Yes
P7	Supports internationalization and ranking-related initiatives through special international projects	Teaching and Learning Committee experience; supports internationalization and ranking-related quality initiatives	Student exchanges, international scholarships, international linkages and special internationalization projects	3 years	Chief, Special International Projects; member, Teaching and Learning Committee	Yes

To preserve confidentiality, participant identities were anonymized using participant codes (P1–P7).

Data Analysis

The study employed Clark Moustakas' transcendental phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of internal university stakeholders navigating ranking-driven quality

assurance practices. Seven stakeholders, purposively selected for their direct involvement in quality assurance, research, internationalization, and global ranking submissions, participated in the study.

These participants represented various university functional offices, providing diverse institutional perspectives. Semi-structured interviews constituted the primary data source. Each interview was conducted individually and guided by open-ended questions to elicit detailed accounts of participants' experiences with global university rankings and the implementation of related institutional initiatives. Follow-up probes clarified responses and encouraged deeper reflection. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

To triangulate the data, the study reviewed institutional documents such as the University Development Plan (UDP), Office Performance Commitment and Review (OPCR), Individual Performance Commitment and Review (IPCR), and ranking-related reports to provide context for institutional responses to rankings. The researcher maintained reflexive journaling throughout the study to document assumptions, observations, and methodological decisions.

Data analysis employed Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach. The process commenced with epoche (bracketing), in which the researcher systematically documented and set aside prior assumptions, professional experiences, and personal perspectives related to university rankings and quality assurance.

After epoche, the researcher horizontalized interview transcripts. The researcher identified significant statements about participants' experiences with global university rankings and assigned them equal weight during the initial analysis. The researcher then grouped these statements into meaning units and preliminary categories based on shared meanings. The researcher analyzed the resulting categories using phenomenological reduction and imaginative variation to identify recurring patterns and underlying experiential structures.

Iterative comparison and refinement consolidated categories into broader themes that captured the essence of participants' shared experiences. Textural descriptions detailed what participants experienced, while structural descriptions explained how these experiences unfolded within the institutional context. The textural and structural descriptions were then synthesized into a composite textural-structural description that articulates the universal essence of internal university stakeholders' experiences with global university rankings.

Table 2. Analysis Trail Table

Stage of Analysis	Output
Interview Transcripts	Raw Data
Significant Statements	271 Statements
Meaning Units	Initial Meaning Clusters
Categories	15 Categories
Themes	5 Major Themes
Textural Descriptions	What Participants Experienced
Structural Descriptions	How Participants Experienced the Phenomenon
Composite Essence	Universal Essence of the Experience

This table illustrates the progression of data analysis from raw interview transcripts to the composite essence. This analytical process increases transparency and demonstrates the systematic application of Moustakas' transcendental phenomenological procedures.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the study's trustworthiness, the researcher employed several strategies consistent with qualitative and phenomenological research. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, in which participants received summaries of their interview responses and preliminary interpretations to verify the accuracy and authenticity of the researcher's understanding of their experiences.

Data triangulation was achieved through multiple sources of evidence, including semi-structured interviews, reflexive journaling, and institutional documents such as the University Development Plan (UDP), Office Performance Commitment and Review (OPCR), and Individual Performance Commitment and Review (IPCR). Converging these data sources strengthened the credibility of the findings by providing multiple perspectives on the phenomenon under investigation.

Peer debriefing and maintaining an audit trail supported dependability and confirmability. A peer debriefing was conducted with the dissertation adviser, who reviewed the coding process, theme development, and the interpretation of findings to ensure methodological consistency and analytical rigor. The study maintained an audit trail throughout to document key methodological decisions, coding procedures, theme refinement, and analytical reflections, enhancing transparency and enabling systematic tracing of the research process.

To promote transferability, the study used thick description to present participants' narratives, institutional contexts, and thematic findings. Rich, detailed accounts of stakeholders' experiences enabled readers to assess the findings' applicability to similar higher-education contexts. In addition, the researcher maintained reflexive journaling throughout the research process to support epoche and bracketing, allowing continuous reflection on personal assumptions and minimizing their influence on data interpretation. Collectively, these procedures strengthened the study's credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study's results on internal university stakeholders' experiences with worldwide university rankings are presented below. The analysis uses a transcendental phenomenological approach to capture textural descriptions (what participants experienced) and structural descriptions (how these experiences occurred), identifying core themes that capture the phenomenon's essence.

The results show how stakeholders negotiate and react to ranking-driven institutional demands at a public university with economic limitations. Thematic clusters represent institutional alignment, strategic adaptability, structural limits, and changing quality concepts. The topics are embedded in participants' narratives but analyzed through broader theoretical lenses.

World-Class University (WCU) Theory is used to analyze these results, showing how stakeholders' lived experiences reflect and challenge its assumptions. The section goes beyond description to explain how global ranking systems shape institutional practices and expose weaknesses in the WCU model in resource-constrained, context-specific settings.

Theme 1: Institutional Alignment with World-Class University Ideals

This theme supports the assumptions of World-Class University Theory, which posits that institutions seeking global competitiveness strategically align organizational policies, governance structures, and performance systems with internationally recognized standards of excellence (Altbach, 2004; Salmi, 2009). Stakeholder experiences indicate that ranking indicators are now embedded within institutional planning and quality assurance processes.

The findings further suggest that this alignment is not solely a voluntary pursuit of excellence

but also a response to external pressures for legitimacy and visibility. This extends World-Class University Theory by emphasizing the organizational negotiations required to adopt global standards.

Category 1: Policy and KPI Realignment

Participants elucidated that the University Development Plan (UDP), Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), Office Performance Commitment Review/Individual Performance Commitment Review (OPCR/IPCR), research objectives, and internationalization programs were modified to ensure compliance with international standards. Collaboration across departments, senior management support, and integrating ranking criteria into standard institutional planning and quality assurance processes were essential to this alignment.

"The key performance indicators (KPIs) were revised across the institution, affecting top management, faculty members, and overall organizational performance measures." (P6)

"The KPIs have changed across top management or top administration, including the faculty and overall performance." (P7)

Category 2: Strategic Integration into Institutional Planning

It describes how the university uses the University Development Plan, KPIs, and institutional targets to align its policies, plans, and performance measures with global ranking requirements. This ensures that all offices, administrators, and faculty work toward shared strategic goals.

"Based on the University Development Plan leading to 2028, internationalization has already been incorporated as one of the institutional priorities." (P2)

"We already incorporated the metrics of the different university rankings, such as QS and THE, in the university development plan." (P4)

Category 3: Adoption of Global Performance Standards

This category illustrates the growing influence of internationally acknowledged standards on institutional procedures within university ranking systems. Stakeholders said the institution has begun implementing standardized indicators—such as research output, citation impact, internationalization measures, and performance-based assessment systems—within its operational and strategic framework. These criteria are often integrated into institutional planning papers, quality assurance systems, and performance management instruments, indicating a shift toward conformity with global standards of academic achievement.

"We have observed that the university is putting a lot of effort into internationalization, and some policies and executive orders and guidelines have been changed." (P6)

"What they did was, you know, they changed the IPCR and OPCR. That is why if you look at our University Development Plan (UDP), you will notice there is a lot in there. In fact, in our sector, we have the most extensive OPCR—it is very long. That is because the metrics now include everything related to rankings. They added all of it because those are what are being required."

A predominant theme that surfaced from the stakeholders' accounts is the gradual synchronization of institutional policies, goals, and operational procedures with the metrics

highlighted in global university rankings. Participants indicated that the institution has progressively aligned its strategic direction with internationally recognized standards, particularly in areas such as research productivity, internationalization, and performance-based evaluation systems.

This alignment is evident in the integration of ranking-related indicators into institutional planning documents, key performance indicators, and quality assurance frameworks. Such developments reflect the growing influence of global rankings as governance mechanisms that shape institutional priorities and decision-making processes (Hazelkorn & Mihut, 2021; Brankovic et al., 2023).

Moreover, this convergence toward standardized performance metrics illustrates how universities respond to external pressures for legitimacy and competitiveness, consistent with processes of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). At the same time, these indicators closely mirror the characteristics associated with World-Class University models, particularly research excellence and international visibility—thereby reinforcing the internalization of global definitions of quality (Salmi, 2009; Altbach, 2004).

Theme 2: Research Intensification as a Marker of Institutional Excellence

This theme reinforces the central assumption of World-Class University Theory, which posits that research productivity is a primary indicator of institutional excellence and global competitiveness. Participants noted that publications, citations, and research outputs have become increasingly significant in institutional planning and evaluation.

However, stakeholders also reported increased performance pressures and workload demands related to meeting research targets. These findings indicate that although research productivity is a key element of institutional advancement, pursuing it may produce unintended consequences that traditional World-Class University frameworks do not fully address.

Category 1: Pressure to Increase Research Output

This category reflects heightened demands on faculty and institutional units to produce more research outputs to meet global university ranking criteria. Stakeholders said that research productivity—especially publications in indexed journals and citation impact—has emerged as a primary success metric inside the institution. Consequently, academic endeavors are increasingly structured to meet specific research objectives, indicating a shift toward output-oriented assessment frameworks.

“The ultimate goal is to transform PUP into a highly intensive research university.” (P3)

“We also align the workshops and research trainings, mixing and collaboration, to improve the faculty performance in terms of research, extension, and quality of instruction.” (P4)

“That means we submitted, but we did not meet the minimum requirements, so we were not given a rank. We only have reporter status because our publications were insufficient. The minimum required is 1,800, and we only have that number so far.” (P6)

This discovery aligns with literature that recognizes research output as a key factor in attaining world-class university status (Altbach, 2004). Stakeholder accounts indicate that this focus is not only an institutional objective but also an ongoing pressure to increase research output to meet externally set criteria.

These initiatives show how institutional frameworks are intentionally structured to boost

research output, underscoring research as a primary performance metric. These changes align with research suggesting that universities intentionally use resources to build research capacity and elevate their rankings and global prominence (Adam, 2023; Khan et al., 2020).

Concurrently, stakeholders' narratives highlight the importance of these expectations, especially when institutions do not meet basic ranking standards. One participant said, "We submitted, but we did not fulfill the basic requirements... we only possess reporter status due to our inadequate publications" (P6).

This underscores that research output serves not just as a performance metric but also as a gatekeeping device that influences institutional recognition in ranking systems. Comparable results appear in the literature, where ranking algorithms favor publication volume and citation impact, often disadvantaging universities with constrained research resources (Safón & Docampo, 2020; Gadd et al., 2021).

This increase in research reflects the growing "publish or perish" culture linked to global ranking pressures, which reshapes academic labor and professional standards (Bayanbayeva, 2025b). Although these incentives may increase research productivity, they also risk narrowing academic activity by favoring quantifiable results over other fundamental university duties. This substantiates claims that ranking systems limit academic objectives, favoring measurable metrics above teaching quality, community involvement, and social influence (Hauptman Komotar, 2020; Kaiser et al., 2022).

Theme 3: Internationalization as an Aspirational and Strategic Imperative

This theme supports the World-Class University (WCU) assumption that internationalization enhances institutional visibility, reputation, and competitiveness. Stakeholder narratives indicate that contextual factors, especially financial constraints and institutional capacity, shape internationalization.

Instead of serving as a universally attainable indicator of quality, internationalization appears to be a strategic goal constrained by available resources. These findings extend WCU Theory by showing that the pursuit of internationalization depends not only on institutional commitment but also on structural conditions that influence implementation.

Category 1: Expansion of Global Partnerships

This category reflects the institution's growing efforts to build and strengthen global connections in response to global university ranking requirements. Stakeholders said that establishing connections with foreign universities, research institutions, and international organizations has become a key way to increase institutional visibility, foster research cooperation, and facilitate intellectual exchange. These collaborations often take the form of memoranda of understanding (MOUs), joint research initiatives, academic exchanges, and participation in global networks.

"It is also part of the university's goal in terms of branding. The university has been doing these initiatives regularly, so entering internationalization is just an addition, and we can retain what we already have." (P5)

"We realized that participating in these rankings had a big impact in the international arena. We became more visible to our partners, especially our international partners." (P7)

Category 2: Faculty and Student Mobility Efforts

This category covers institutional initiatives to enhance professor and student mobility as

part of comprehensive internationalization policies linked to global university rankings. Stakeholders outlined plans that include participation in foreign conferences, short-term academic exchanges, training programs, and joint teaching or research endeavors overseas. These initiatives aim to broaden academic exposure, build international networks, and elevate the university's global standing.

"For them, having foreign faculty and foreign students is really a requirement; it is already part of their way of life. For us, I am not sure about other universities, but in our case, we are not yet that prepared." (P2)

"Often, the student exchange requires financial support, and the university has limited resources for them. So that is the limitation of internationalization, though it is good. It also helps build partnerships with other universities. However, the main concern is the budget." (P4)

Category 3: Barriers to Sustainable Internationalization

This category encompasses the limitations that hinder the continuity, depth, and efficacy of internationalization initiatives inside the institution. Although stakeholders acknowledged internationalization as a strategic objective, they also identified several obstacles that impede its ongoing execution. These include constrained financial resources, inadequate institutional infrastructure, limited access to global networks, and administrative challenges in managing foreign activities.

"That is why we did not get the rank because of the ratio of getting or doing internationalization versus the number of populations that we have. We did not hit the target because of that." (P6)

"Sometimes the metrics in the university ranking do not conform with the actual scenario in the university because of the limited resources of the university." (P4)

"They saw the need for us to keep up with the international arena. One of the indicators is the ratio of foreign students, and this is really the bottleneck — the number of international students." (P7)

This focus underscores the growing importance of internationalization as a critical aspect of institutional success, as several worldwide rankings include metrics on international cooperation, foreign professors and students, and global participation (Acar, 2022; Shin & Lee, 2022). Furthermore, internationalization is acknowledged as an essential attribute of World-Class Universities, with global connectedness and cross-border academic interaction seen as indicators of quality (Salmi, 2009; Altbach, 2004).

Theme 4: Structural Constraints in Achieving World-Class Status

This theme challenges a central assumption of World-Class University Theory: that institutions inherently possess or can feasibly acquire the resources required to attain world-class status. World-Class University models identify abundant financial resources, advanced infrastructure, research capacity, and international networks as essential prerequisites for excellence (Salmi, 2009).

In contrast, stakeholders consistently reported financial constraints, inadequate infrastructure, large student bodies, and unequal access to global academic networks as significant barriers to achieving ranking expectations.

The findings also challenge the implicit assumption that institutions compete under comparable conditions. Participants noted that ranking systems frequently favor well-resourced universities, placing public universities in developing countries at a structural disadvantage.

As a result, institutional performance may reflect disparities in available resources rather than genuine differences in educational quality. These observations indicate that resource availability should be recognized as a central factor shaping institutions' ability to pursue global competitiveness, rather than as a neutral background condition.

Category 1: Resource Limitations

This category illustrates the ongoing financial and material limitations that influence the institution's ability to meet global university ranking requirements. Stakeholders regularly identified insufficient funding, poor facilities, and limited access to research support as primary obstacles to meeting globally accepted performance standards. These constraints are especially evident in a public university setting, where resources must be allocated among many essential roles, including teaching, research, outreach, and administrative activities.

"For example, for the library, we need to spend the minimum or the maximum that we should spend on the library. For the students, \$250 per student. How will you fund that kind of money for the students, for the library? Furthermore, this is based on international standards. \$250 per student. But at present, how much? I think it is just \$17 as far." (P6)

"I think that is what makes it somewhat difficult, ma'am, because as much as we want to provide data, we just cannot keep up with the standards." (P7)

"The university finds it hard to indulge in internationalization because of the limited business space or limited budget" (P4)

Category 2: Institutional Size and Population Challenges

This category shows how the institution's scale—specifically its large student body and multi-campus presence—affects stakeholders' ability to meet global university ranking requirements. Participants noted that serving a wide, diverse student population across multiple campuses creates operational challenges that affect instructional delivery, data administration, and resource distribution. This scale is a significant strength of the institution in terms of accessibility and public service. However, it also creates problems when measured against ranking systems that rely on standardized, often ratio-based metrics.

"It is hard to collect information and data if you have large catering or servicing large populations." (P4)

"Because the university has a large population, percentage-based indicators tend to place the institution at a disadvantage." (P5)

"We are in the position that we are really our competition; we compete with our own numbers." (P6)

Category 2: Inequities in Global Competition

This category reflects stakeholders' acknowledgment of structural disparities in global university ranking systems that shape institutional competition and assessment. Participants said

that worldwide rankings often favor well-funded, research-intensive colleges, mostly in wealthy nations, while schools in resource-limited contexts face systemic disadvantages. These disparities affect both institutional efficacy and the perceived legitimacy and prominence of institutions within the global academic arena.

"So, there is no amount of preparation because no amount of diligence in data gathering and collection is enough." (P7)

"Data cannot be manipulated because the information already exists and must be reported as it is." (P4) "Publishing in Scopus is not solely an indicator of good research. Good research must focus on how it transformed a society's life or how it contributes to society. Furthermore, it is not measured by the university." (P5)

"We cannot compete at this time with UI Green Metric because we do not have the laboratory, we do not have the equipment, we do not have the policy yet." (P6)

A significant restriction stakeholders recognized is the ongoing deficiency in financial and material resources. Participants noted that meeting international standards often requires funding levels beyond institutional capacity. One stakeholder emphasized the incongruity between global aspirations and local reality, noting that worldwide standards require around \$250 per student for library resources. However, the school can invest only a small portion of that sum (P6).

Likewise, stakeholders noted challenges in meeting data and reporting obligations, stating that "despite our desire to give data, we are unable to meet the standards" (P7). These examples show how resource constraints significantly affect the institution's capacity to meet ranking criteria related to research output, infrastructure, and internationalization. These results challenge the premises of World-Class University (WCU) Theory, which assumes that significant financial and institutional resources underpin greatness (Salmi, 2009).

Beyond financial limitations, stakeholders identified difficulties stemming from the institution's considerable size and demographics. Educating a wide-ranging student population across several campuses complicates data collection, resource distribution, and performance evaluation. One participant said, "collecting information and statistics is challenging when serving huge populations" (P4), while another stated that "percentage-based indicators sometimes disfavor the institution" (P5).

These studies suggest that ranking systems, which largely rely on ratio-based criteria like faculty-to-student ratios and research output per capita, may not fully reflect the contributions of large public institutions. Rather than seeing size as an asset for expanding access and delivering public services, rankings treat it as a constraint.

Alongside internal limitations, stakeholders recognized wider disparities in global competitiveness that further harm institutions functioning in resource-constrained environments. These anecdotes underscore how institutional performance is assessed against norms that are not uniformly achievable, hence perpetuating structural inequities in higher education. This corresponds with criticisms that global rankings perpetuate existing inequalities and favor institutions with superior access to resources and international networks (Hazelkorn & Mihut, 2021; Bellantuono et al., 2022).

Collectively, the data indicate that structural restrictions are not marginal obstacles but fundamental variables that shape stakeholders' experiences navigating global university rankings. The interaction of finite resources, institutional size, and systemic inequalities creates a framework in which attaining world-class status is both aspirational and restricted. This reveals a fundamental

conflict between the premises of WCU Theory and institutions' lived experiences in the Global South, where resource constraints and public mandates shape institutional priorities.

This issue emphasizes the need to re-evaluate the relevance of universal excellence models critically and to create more contextually sensitive frameworks that acknowledge institutional diversity, resource inequalities, and the overarching purposes of higher education.

Theme 5: Reframing Quality Beyond Metrics

This theme challenges the assumption that ranking indicators such as research output, citations, internationalization, and reputation can fully represent institutional excellence. Although participants recognized the importance of these metrics, they consistently defined quality more broadly, including teaching effectiveness, accessibility, inclusivity, graduate outcomes, social relevance, and nation-building.

These findings extend World-Class University Theory by showing that excellence depends not only on global competitiveness but also on institutional responsiveness to societal needs. Stakeholders understood quality through both measurable outputs and the university's capacity to transform lives, broaden educational opportunities, and contribute to national development. Therefore, the findings support a context-sensitive and multidimensional understanding of excellence that integrates global standards with public responsibilities.

Category: Quality as Teaching and Learning Excellence

This category reflects stakeholders' understanding of quality as rooted in effective teaching and meaningful learning outcomes, rather than being defined solely by research-based metrics. Participants underscored that the university's primary role is to educate students and cultivate graduates who are proficient, ethical, and able to contribute to society.

"Who they become reflects the one who taught them. It is not just about becoming the best doctor or ranking first. What matters is who they become and how they contribute to society. That is how I see it—that is how it should be defined: how you can change the world through your impact and influence." (P1)

"The things that needed improvement in the system and the areas where we were lacking were further improved. Graduates are being hired, and for me, that is what I call quality education." (P2)

"And that can be seen in our board exam results—we still achieve rankings. This means that despite having a very, very large student population, we continue to produce quality graduates." (P5)

Category 2: Quality as Accessibility and Inclusivity

This category reflects stakeholders' understanding of excellence as the university's ability to provide extensive, equal access to higher education and meet the needs of diverse learners. Participants underscored that, as a public institution, a key indicator of quality is its capacity to serve a diverse and large student body, particularly those from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds. In this setting, accessibility and diversity are fundamental to the institution's purpose and identity.

"For me, quality means being inclusive, accessible, and socially relevant. What about societal impact and nation-building? For me, those should also be aligned." (P3)

"It should focus on the quality of the research being produced, how this research transforms into actionable policies, or how this research improves the quality of life of Filipinos or their students." (P4)

Category 3: Quality as Social Relevance and Nation-Building

This category represents stakeholders' perception of quality as the university's role in societal advancement, namely in promoting national development and meeting community needs. Participants underscored that the authentic criterion of institutional greatness is not only academic achievements but also the degree to which graduates and research contributions have significant social impact. From this perspective, quality is intrinsically linked to the university's function in cultivating people who enhance societal welfare and in engaging in projects that address local and national issues.

"Even if we are not visible socially, even if we are not included in the QS ranking or other global rankings, our social relevance is significant, our societal impact is substantial, and the contributions we make to nation-building are immense. For me, that is more important." (P3)

"My definition of quality in higher education aligns with many of the indicators used in the global university ranking. However, there are also important lessons to consider. Global ranking often emphasizes measurable factors such as research output, faculty qualifications, internationalization, employees' reputation, and student-faculty ratio. These indicators do capture essential components of institutional quality. However, this measurement was not able to capture the university's contributions to improving students' quality of life." (P4)

Quality as teaching and learning excellence underpins this reframe. University stakeholders stressed that students should be knowledgeable, ethical, and socially responsible. One participant said individuals may alter the world through their impact and influence by shaping their character and contributions to society (P1). This approach emphasizes education's transformational power above institutional prominence.

Participants identified graduate employability and performance outcomes as quality indicators, stating that "graduates are being hired... and for me, that is what I call quality education" (P2) and that "despite a very large student population, we continue to produce quality graduates" (P5). These accounts frame quality in concrete terms, such as student performance and contributions to society. These results contradict global rankings' research-centric focus and support arguments that prevailing assessment systems undervalue teaching and learning (Hauptman Komotar, 2020; Kaiser et al., 2022).

Through World-Class University (WCU) Theory, this subject shows the limits of a performance-oriented notion of greatness. Salmi (2009) and Altbach (2004) cite research intensity, worldwide visibility, and resource capacity as quality metrics in WCU models. However, stakeholders' lived experiences imply that these factors alone cannot capture institutional greatness. Quality becomes multifaceted and must account for contextual conditions, institutional missions, and societal duties.

This subject shows a major rethinking of higher education quality. It emphasizes the need to move beyond metric-driven frameworks and adopt more inclusive, context-sensitive methods that reflect universities' different functions. It offers a solid factual framework for analyzing and expanding World-Class University Theory, especially at resource-constrained state institutions.

Stakeholders defined quality broadly, including educational efficacy, accessibility, and social

significance. These viewpoints support the idea that higher education quality is complicated, context-dependent, and cannot be reduced to ranking indicators (Kaiser et al., 2022). These results further corroborate criticism that worldwide university rankings fail to represent higher education institutions' overall goals, notably teaching, diversity, and social impact (Rider et al., 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the lived experiences of internal stakeholders as they navigated global university rankings within a resource-constrained Philippine public university. Employing a transcendental phenomenological approach, the research found that stakeholders actively engaged in institutional efforts to align policies, performance indicators, research initiatives, and internationalization programs with global ranking requirements.

At the same time, participants faced significant structural challenges, including limited resources, institutional scale, and unequal competitive conditions. Despite these challenges, stakeholders articulated broader conceptions of quality that extended beyond ranking metrics, emphasizing teaching excellence, accessibility, inclusivity, social relevance, and nation-building.

This study contributes to World-Class University Theory by offering a stakeholder-centered perspective on how excellence is conceptualized and pursued within a resource-constrained public university. The findings affirm the theory's emphasis on research productivity, internationalization, and institutional visibility as key drivers of organizational behavior.

However, the results also challenge two core assumptions embedded within the theory. First, participants' accounts of financial limitations, infrastructure constraints, large student populations, and unequal access to international networks question the notion that institutions operate under relatively comparable conditions. Second, the belief that standardized performance indicators can adequately represent excellence is challenged by stakeholders' broader conceptions of quality, rooted in teaching effectiveness, social responsibility, accessibility, and societal impact.

Therefore, the study extends World-Class University Theory by proposing that institutional excellence be understood as a context-sensitive, multidimensional construct rather than a universal set of measurable outcomes.

More broadly, the findings underscore the need for higher education policymakers, ranking organizations, and institutional leaders to adopt more inclusive definitions of quality that acknowledge institutional diversity and contextual realities. Although global rankings may serve as useful benchmarks for improvement, they should not constitute the sole basis for defining excellence.

For public universities in developing-country contexts, excellence should also be assessed through contributions to educational access, social mobility, community engagement, and national development. Accordingly, this study highlights the importance of balancing global competitiveness with public responsibility and advocates for a more contextually responsive approach to evaluating institutional quality in higher education.

LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH

This study examined the lived experiences of internal university stakeholders as they navigated global university rankings and implemented ranking-driven quality assurance reforms. Although the research produced detailed and contextually grounded insights, several limitations warrant consideration.

First, the study utilized a transcendental-phenomenological design and purposively selected 7 internal university stakeholders. In alignment with qualitative phenomenological inquiry, the aim was to achieve an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences rather than statistical generalization.

Therefore, the findings may not be broadly transferable to all higher education institutions or stakeholder groups. The perspectives captured were limited to stakeholders directly engaged in quality assurance, research, internationalization, planning, and ranking-related processes. This investigation did not include other institutional actors, including non-administrative faculty, students, alumni, and external partners.

Second, the research was conducted at a single public higher education institution in the Philippines. Given that institutional structures, governance systems, resource capacities, and organizational cultures vary across universities, the experiences described may not fully represent those of private universities, smaller colleges, or institutions in different national and institutional contexts.

Third, the study focused on stakeholders' subjective meanings, interpretations, and experiences rather than quantitative institutional performance indicators or comparative ranking outcomes. Consequently, the research did not assess the statistical effectiveness of ranking-driven reforms or measure institutional performance using bibliometric, financial, or ranking data. The emphasis remained on how stakeholders experienced, interpreted, and enacted ranking-related institutional changes.

Finally, because transcendental phenomenological research is depth-oriented and time and scope were limited, the study did not include cross-institutional comparisons. Future research could strengthen and extend these findings by incorporating comparative institutional cases, a mixed-methods approach, or broader stakeholder representation to examine how ranking-driven reforms differ across diverse higher education settings.

Despite these limitations, the study offers nuanced insights into how internal university stakeholders experience and respond to the growing influence of global university rankings in contemporary higher education.

Theoretical Implication

The findings indicate that future applications of World-Class University Theory should more explicitly consider institutional context, resource disparities, and public service mandates. Instead of conceptualizing excellence as a universal model defined mainly by research intensity and international visibility, future frameworks should acknowledge multiple pathways to excellence that align with diverse institutional missions and societal responsibilities.

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