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Repositioning Nigerian Universities for Improved Global Competitiveness: Issues, Ranking Performance and Strategies for Enhancing International University Rankings

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Abstract: University ranking has become an important feature of contemporary higher education, providing comparative information about institutional performance in teaching, research, internationalisation, innovation and other dimensions of university activity. International ranking systems such as the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings have increasingly influenced how universities are perceived by students, academics, governments, industries and international partners. The 2026 THE World University Rankings included 24 Nigerian universities, representing an increase from previous editions; however, the leading Nigerian institutions remained outside the global top 800. The University of Ibadan and University of Lagos jointly occupied the highest Nigerian position, within the 801–1000 global band. This paper examines the concept of higher institution ranking, its importance, major reasons for the relatively low ranking of Nigerian universities, and the performance of Nigerian universities in the 2026 THE ranking. The review identifies inadequate research funding, weak research visibility and citation impact, limited internationalisation, poor teaching and learning environments, weak university–industry linkages, inadequate infrastructure, brain drain, weak institutional data management, limited postgraduate research capacity and inadequate global academic visibility as major constraints. THE's methodology evaluates research-intensive universities through 18 performance indicators organised into five pillars: teaching, research environment, research quality, international outlook and industry. Research quality accounts for 30%, teaching 29.5%, research environment 29%, international outlook 7.5% and industry 4%. The paper argues that Nigerian universities should view ranking not merely as a competition for league-table positions but as an instrument for institutional benchmarking, quality improvement, research development and global engagement. Sustainable improvement requires increased research investment, stronger postgraduate education, improved infrastructure, international collaboration, academic staff retention, industry partnerships and reliable institutional data systems.

Keywords: niversity ranking; higher education; Times Higher Education; global competitiveness; research quality; internationalisation

1. Introduction

The Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings 2026 provide an important international benchmark for assessing universities according to teaching, research, knowledge transfer and international engagement. The 2026 edition shows that Nigerian universities have made some progress in terms of international visibility, but their overall global positioning remains relatively modest. According to THE, 24 Nigerian universities were included in the 2026 World University Rankings, three more than in the previous edition. However, only two Nigerian universities entered the global 801–1000 band, while the majority were placed in the 1501+ category [1].

It is important to note that THE uses rank bands rather than assigning an exact numerical position to universities outside the highest positions. Consequently, it would be academically inaccurate to state that, for example, a university ranked "1002nd" when THE reports it as 1001–1200. The Nigerian ranking should therefore be interpreted using the official bands.

Table 1. Best 10 Nigerian Universities in THE World University Rankings 2026

Nigeria Rank	University	THE World Ranking 2026	Overall Score
=1	University of Ibadan	801–1000	35.5–38.9
=1	University of Lagos	801–1000	35.5–38.9
=3	Bayero University	1001–1200	32.1–35.4
=3	Covenant University	1001–1200	32.1–35.4
=3	Landmark University	1001–1200	32.1–35.4
=6	Ahmadu Bello University	1201–1500	27.3–32.0
=6	Federal University of Technology, Minna	1201–1500	27.3–32.0
=6	University of Ilorin	1201–1500	27.3–32.0
=6	University of Jos	1201–1500	27.3–32.0
=6	University of Nigeria, Nsukka	1201–1500	27.3–32.0

The above ranking is taken directly from THE's official Best Universities in Nigeria 2026 table.

Analysis of Nigeria's Performance

University of Ibadan and University of Lagos: Joint First in Nigeria

The University of Ibadan (UI) and University of Lagos (UNILAG) jointly occupy first position among Nigerian universities in the 2026 THE ranking, both falling within the 801–1000 global band. UI recorded particularly strong performance in research quality, with a score of 63.5, while UNILAG recorded 66.7. UNILAG also performed relatively strongly in international outlook, scoring 45.6, compared with UI's 43.8. This is significant because both institutions are established public research universities with broad disciplinary portfolios and long-standing research traditions. However, their placement in the 801–1000 band also demonstrates the considerable distance between Nigeria's leading universities and the world's highest-ranked institutions.

Bayero University, Covenant University and Landmark University: Strong Second Tier

Bayero University, Covenant University and Landmark University jointly occupy third position nationally, with all three located in the 1001–1200 global band. Their

performance demonstrates that Nigerian universities outside the traditional leading public universities are increasingly becoming visible internationally [2]. An interesting feature is the variation in their institutional strengths. Covenant University recorded a particularly strong industry score of 55.7, while its research-environment score was 27.5. Landmark University recorded a research-quality score of 61.9, while Bayero University achieved 60.7 in the same area. This suggests that Nigerian universities can develop distinctive competitive advantages even when their overall global ranking remains within the same band.

Five Universities Occupy the 1201–1500 Global Band

Ahmadu Bello University, Federal University of Technology Minna, University of Ilorin, University of Jos and University of Nigeria, Nsukka jointly occupy sixth position nationally and are placed in the 1201–1500 global band. The group demonstrates considerable variation in performance indicators. For example, University of Ilorin recorded a relatively high research-quality score of 64.8, while University of Nigeria, Nsukka recorded a relatively strong teaching score of 32.0. Ahmadu Bello University also performed strongly in research quality, with a score of 58.9 [3].

Thus, the ranking should not be interpreted as meaning that universities within the 1201–1500 band are uniformly weak. Rather, their overall positions reflect the combined performance of different indicators. The most important observation from the 2026 results is that Nigeria has increased its representation but has not yet achieved strong global positioning. THE reports that 24 Nigerian universities appeared in the 2026 rankings, representing an increase of three institutions from the previous year. Nevertheless, only University of Ibadan and University of Lagos reached the 801–1000 global band, while many of the remaining Nigerian universities were placed at 1501+.

This creates an important distinction between participation and competitiveness. Nigeria's increasing number of ranked universities indicates improved international visibility and institutional participation. However, the concentration of institutions in lower global bands suggests that the country still faces challenges in research impact, research environment, teaching capacity, international outlook and industry engagement [4].

The 2026 results also reveal that research quality constitutes an important area of strength for several Nigerian universities. THE's data show relatively high research-quality scores for University of Lagos (66.7), University of Ibadan (63.5), University of Ilorin (64.8), Landmark University (61.9) and Bayero University (60.7).

This finding is important because it challenges a simplistic interpretation that Nigerian universities perform poorly across all dimensions. Some institutions demonstrate considerable capacity to produce research that achieves international scholarly recognition. The policy challenge is to translate these pockets of research strength into broader institutional improvements in research environment, teaching, internationalization and industry engagement [5].

The relatively low global positioning also reflects weaknesses in international outlook. THE's methodology evaluates international students, international staff and international research collaboration as components of its international outlook indicator. Among the leading Nigerian universities, Bayero University recorded 49.6, University of Lagos 45.6, Federal University of Technology Minna 44.6, Ahmadu Bello University 44.2 and University of Ibadan 43.8 for international outlook. These figures suggest that there is room for Nigerian universities to deepen international academic partnerships, attract international scholars and students, and increase internationally collaborative research. It is against this background, that this study seeks to examine the reasons or factors responsible for poor ranking of Nigerian universities [6].

2. Materials and Methods

2.0 Conceptual terms

Concept of Higher Institution Ranking

Higher institution ranking refers to the systematic process of assessing, comparing and ordering universities and other higher education institutions according to predetermined indicators of institutional performance. It involves the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data relating to areas such as teaching and learning, research productivity and quality, academic reputation, internationalisation, graduate outcomes, innovation, industry engagement and institutional resources. The outcome is usually presented as a league table or ranking band that enables institutions to be compared within a country, region or globally. University ranking should, however, be distinguished from a simple declaration of which university is "good" or "bad." Different ranking organisations employ different methodologies, indicators and weightings; consequently, the same university may occupy different positions in different rankings. QS, for example, considers research and discovery, employability and outcomes, learning experience, global engagement and sustainability, whereas THE evaluates teaching, research environment, research quality, international outlook and industry engagement.

The Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE-WUR) provide a useful illustration of contemporary higher institution ranking. The 2026 methodology uses 18 performance indicators organised under five pillars: teaching (29.5%), research environment (29%), research quality (30%), international outlook (7.5%) and industry (4%). Research quality includes citation impact, research strength, research excellence and research influence, while international outlook considers international students, international staff and international research collaboration. Conceptually, therefore, higher institution ranking can be regarded as an institutional benchmarking mechanism through which universities' relative strengths and weaknesses are identified using specified performance indicators. It provides stakeholders with comparative information about institutional performance while also creating incentives for universities to improve their teaching, research, innovation, international engagement and other core functions. It is important to emphasise that rankings are not comprehensive measures of every dimension of university quality. Their conclusions depend substantially on the indicators selected and the weight assigned to each indicator. For this reason, ranking results should be interpreted alongside accreditation outcomes, programme quality, graduate performance, institutional mission and other measures of educational effectiveness. QS itself notes that different ranking systems use different methodologies, while THE describes its ranking as a benchmark for comparing research-intensive universities across their core missions.

Five Importance of Higher Institution Ranking

Provides a Basis for Institutional Benchmarking

One of the major importance of higher institution ranking is that it provides universities with a basis for benchmarking their performance against comparable institutions nationally and internationally. Ranking indicators enable university administrators to identify areas where their institutions perform relatively well and areas requiring improvement. For example, THE's indicators allow institutions to examine their performance in teaching, research environment, research quality, international outlook and industry engagement. Consequently, a university can compare its research productivity, citation impact, international collaboration or industry engagement with those of competing institutions. From an educational-management perspective, this makes ranking potentially useful for strategic planning, quality improvement and institutional performance management. University managers can use ranking data to establish performance targets, allocate resources and monitor progress over time.

Supports Students' and Parents' Decision-Making

Higher institution ranking also provides information that can assist prospective students and their parents in selecting universities. Students frequently need comparative information about universities before deciding where to pursue undergraduate or postgraduate education. THE identifies students and academics among the major users of its rankings and explains that rankings can help students identify leading universities and understand the areas in which individual institutions have particular strengths. Similarly, QS states that its rankings are used by students, parents, governments and the higher education sector as a point of comparison when making decisions. However, students should not select an institution solely on the basis of its overall ranking. Programme accreditation, subject-specific strength, tuition costs, location, learning environment, graduate outcomes and institutional mission should also be considered.

Enhances Institutional Reputation and Global Visibility

Ranking can contribute to the reputation and international visibility of universities. Institutions that perform strongly in recognised international rankings can use their positions to communicate evidence of institutional performance to prospective students, academics, governments, employers and international partners. This is particularly important in an increasingly international higher education environment where universities compete for international students, academic talent, research partnerships and external funding. THE explicitly identifies benchmarking performance against global standards and highlighting institutional strengths to attract international students and partnerships as important uses of its rankings (THE, 2026). For Nigerian universities, improved international visibility can therefore support the development of international research collaborations, student mobility, academic exchange programmes and institutional partnerships.

Encourages Improvement in Teaching, Research and Innovation

Another important contribution of ranking is its potential to create institutional pressure and incentives for continuous improvement. Since ranking organisations measure specific dimensions of university performance, institutions seeking to improve their positions may invest in the areas covered by the ranking indicators. For instance, THE gives substantial weight to research environment and research quality. Research quality alone accounts for 30% of the THE 2026 ranking and incorporates citation impact, research strength, research excellence and research influence (THE, 2026). Universities seeking stronger rankings may be encouraged to improve research funding, increase high-quality publications, strengthen postgraduate research, develop international research partnerships and enhance the impact of their research. QS allocates 50% of its current global ranking to the Research and Discovery lens, comprising academic reputation and citations per faculty (QS, 2026). This demonstrates how ranking frameworks can encourage universities to place greater emphasis on research quality and scholarly influence.

Promotes Accountability and Evidence-Based University Management

Ranking can encourage institutional accountability and evidence-based decision-making. Modern rankings require universities to provide reliable information concerning students, academic staff, research, publications, research income, international activities and other institutional characteristics. THE, for example, requires institutions to provide and approve institutional data used in its ranking process. Its methodology also explains how missing data are handled and how different indicators are standardised before being combined into an overall score (THE, 2026). This requirement can encourage universities to develop stronger systems of institutional data collection, monitoring, evaluation and reporting. Rather than making management decisions solely on assumptions or anecdotal evidence, university administrators can use empirical performance information to identify institutional weaknesses and formulate improvement strategies. Ranking can serve as one component of a broader higher education quality-assurance and performance-

management system. Nevertheless, rankings should complement not replace national accreditation, internal quality assurance and other forms of institutional evaluation.

3. Results and Discussion

International university rankings have increasingly become instruments for assessing the global competitiveness, research visibility and institutional performance of universities. Among the prominent ranking systems is the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings, which evaluates research-intensive universities using 18 performance indicators grouped into five broad dimensions: teaching, research environment, research quality, international outlook, and industry. The factors responsible for relative weak global positioning of many Nigerian universities are discussed below:

Inadequate Research Funding and Weak Research Environment

One major factor responsible for the relatively low international ranking of Nigerian universities is inadequate funding for research and the broader research environment. Contemporary global rankings place considerable emphasis on the capacity of universities to generate, finance and sustain research. In the THE 2026 methodology, the research environment accounts for 29% of the overall ranking score, comprising research reputation, research income and research productivity. THE specifically notes that research income is an important indicator because competitive research funding provides resources for developing world-class research. For Nigerian universities, inadequate and irregular research financing can constrain the development of laboratories, libraries, research centres, databases, digital infrastructure, field research and postgraduate research programmes [7]. Where researchers lack sufficient funding, they may be unable to undertake large-scale empirical studies, participate regularly in international conferences, purchase specialised research equipment or publish consistently in highly competitive international journals. Consequently, inadequate research investment can affect several ranking indicators simultaneously. The problem is therefore not merely the absolute amount of money available to universities but also the predictability, accessibility and competitiveness of research funding. A university with weak internal research grants and limited access to international research funding is likely to produce fewer high-impact studies than institutions operating within well-funded research ecosystems. This has implications for both research productivity and institutional research reputation. THE's methodology further demonstrates why this is consequential: research productivity is measured partly through publications indexed in Scopus, while research quality is assessed through citation impact, research strength, research excellence and research influence. Thus, inadequate research financing can indirectly translate into lower scores across multiple dimensions of the ranking.

Low Research Visibility, Citation Impact and International Scholarly Influence

A second major reason is the relatively limited global visibility and citation impact of research produced by many Nigerian universities. In the THE framework, research quality carries the highest individual weighting at 30%, with citation impact alone accounting for 15%. The ranking also considers research strength, research excellence and research influence. This means that producing academic publications alone is insufficient for achieving a strong global ranking position. Universities must produce research that is visible, internationally accessible, academically influential and subsequently used by other researchers. Citation impact is particularly important because THE uses bibliometric data to determine the extent to which published research is being recognised and built upon by the international scholarly community [8]. For the 2026 ranking, THE used data covering millions of publications and citations indexed through Elsevier's Scopus database. A possible implication for Nigerian universities is that research output which is published in journals with limited international visibility may contribute less to global scholarly influence than research published in internationally recognised indexed journals.

Similarly, research fragmentation, weak research collaboration, inadequate institutional support for publication, limited access to current scholarly databases and insufficient attention to research communication can reduce the international visibility of university scholarship. The issue also concerns quality rather than quantity alone. Universities seeking higher international rankings need research that addresses significant national and international problems and contributes to theoretical and empirical debates. THE's inclusion of research excellence and research influence demonstrates that global rankings increasingly distinguish between simply producing publications and producing research that achieves substantial scholarly recognition. Ogunode, (2026) noted that strengthening Nigerian universities' ranking performance requires a shift from a publication-oriented culture to a high-impact research culture characterised by competitive grants, strong research groups, postgraduate research development, international co-authorship, rigorous methodology and publication in reputable indexed outlets [9], [10].

Weak Internationalisation and Limited Global Academic Collaboration

A third important factor is the limited internationalisation of many Nigerian universities. International outlook constitutes 7.5% of the THE 2026 ranking and includes the proportions of international students and staff as well as international research collaboration. THE measures international collaboration partly through the proportion of a university's publications that have at least one international co-author. Internationalisation is important because globally competitive universities do not operate in academic isolation. They establish partnerships with universities, research institutes, industries and professional organisations across different countries. Such relationships facilitate joint research, staff and student mobility, international conferences, joint postgraduate supervision, cross-country research projects and co-publication. These activities can improve both research quality and international academic visibility. The limited international presence of many Nigerian universities may therefore weaken their performance on this dimension [11]. Challenges such as inadequate funding for international mobility, limited institutional partnerships, insufficient numbers of international students and scholars, administrative barriers to international collaboration and inadequate support for international research projects can restrict the ability of universities to participate effectively in global academic networks (Ogunode, Bahodirovna, & Sevdiorovna, 2026). Importantly, international collaboration also has implications beyond the 7.5% allocated specifically to international outlook. International research partnerships can improve research quality, citation impact and institutional reputation, thereby potentially strengthening performance in other ranking dimensions. THE itself links international co-authorship to the assessment of a university's international research outlook [12]. The evidence from the 2026 Nigerian ranking illustrates the broader issue. Although 24 Nigerian universities were included in the THE World University Rankings 2026, only the leading Nigerian institutions entered the 801–1000 global band, while several others were positioned at 1501+. This indicates that Nigerian universities are increasingly participating in global rankings, but their participation has not yet translated into strong global positioning across the major performance dimensions.

Weak Teaching and Learning Environment

Another important factor contributing to the relatively low ranking of Nigerian universities is the weaknesses in the teaching and learning environment. Teaching constitutes 29.5% of the THE World University Rankings 2026 methodology, making it one of the two largest components of the ranking. The teaching pillar measures teaching reputation, staff–student ratio, doctorate-to-bachelor's ratio, doctorates awarded relative to academic staff, and institutional income. The implication is that universities cannot achieve strong international rankings merely by increasing enrolment or producing graduates [13]. They must demonstrate the capacity to provide a learning environment

that supports high-quality teaching, postgraduate training and academic development. Nigerian universities continue to operate in an environment characterised in many institutions by large student populations, pressure on available academic staff, inadequate teaching facilities and insufficient institutional resources. These conditions can affect staff–student ratios, the quality of student engagement and the capacity of universities to provide intensive postgraduate research training. The staff–student ratio is particularly relevant because it serves as one of THE's indicators of the teaching environment. Similarly, the proportion of doctoral students and doctoral graduates provides an indication of the university's capacity to sustain advanced academic training and develop the next generation of researchers. Thus, universities with inadequate academic staffing and weak postgraduate research capacity may find it difficult to compete favourably with institutions that have stronger teaching and doctoral-training systems. Rabi, (2022) suggests that improving the ranking of Nigerian universities requires a systematic investment in academic staff recruitment, staff development, postgraduate education, instructional facilities, libraries, laboratories and student-support systems. The issue should therefore be approached as a question of institutional capacity rather than simply a ranking exercise [14].

Weak University–Industry Linkages, Innovation and Technology Transfer

The limited capacity of many Nigerian universities to establish strong and measurable relationships with industry and convert research into commercially useful innovations. This factor is particularly important because THE explicitly recognises industry engagement as one of its five core pillars. In the 2026 methodology, the industry pillar accounts for 4% of the overall score, comprising industry income and patents. The relatively small weighting should not lead universities to dismiss this dimension. THE explains that industry income captures the extent to which businesses are willing to pay for university research and the institution's ability to attract research funding from the commercial sector. The patent indicator, meanwhile, measures patents that cite research conducted by the university. Many Nigerian universities have considerable intellectual resources but face difficulties in transforming research findings into patents, commercial products, consultancy services, technological innovations and industry-funded research. Weak university–industry collaboration can consequently limit both the financial resources available for research and the practical visibility of university innovations. From a research and development perspective, this creates a cycle: limited industry partnerships reduce opportunities for externally funded research; limited funding constrains innovation infrastructure; weak innovation infrastructure reduces patentable and commercially transferable research; and limited technology transfer subsequently weakens the university's capacity to demonstrate measurable industry impact [15]. Nigerian universities need to move beyond a predominantly teaching-and-publication orientation towards an innovation-oriented institutional model. Universities should strengthen technology-transfer offices, intellectual-property management, university-based enterprises, consultancy units, research commercialisation mechanisms, incubators and structured partnerships with private-sector organisations. Such measures would improve their capacity to perform on THE's industry indicators while simultaneously contributing to national economic development.

Weak Institutional Reputation and Global Academic Visibility

A sixth important factor is limited institutional reputation and international academic visibility. This factor is particularly significant because reputation is embedded directly into the THE ranking methodology. Teaching reputation carries 15%, while research reputation carries another 18%, making reputation collectively one of the most consequential elements of the ranking. THE obtains these reputation measures through its global Academic Reputation Survey, which in the 2026 ranking involved more than 108,000 scholars. Institutional reputation is accumulated over time through sustained

research excellence, influential scholars, international collaboration, notable graduates, high-quality teaching and contributions to society. A university may therefore have competent academics and produce valuable research but still perform poorly internationally if its scholarship and institutional achievements have limited visibility within the global academic community. For some Nigerian universities, inadequate participation in international academic networks, relatively low levels of international collaboration, limited visibility of institutional research outputs and insufficient strategic communication of research achievements may contribute to weaker international recognition. This is important because reputation is not created solely within the university; it is also constructed through recognition by the wider academic community. THE's methodology illustrates the importance of this factor. Research reputation alone accounts for 18% of the ranking, while teaching reputation accounts for 15%. Therefore, strengthening institutional reputation could have a substantial effect on the global competitiveness of Nigerian universities. Universities according to Ogunode Nelly, and Musa (2023) should consequently develop deliberate global visibility strategies, including international research partnerships, high-profile research centres, participation in international academic networks, hosting international conferences, attracting distinguished visiting scholars, improving institutional websites and research repositories, promoting researchers' international profiles, and communicating major research achievements to global scholarly audiences.

Brain Drain and Loss of Experienced Academic Staff

A major structural factor affecting the international competitiveness of Nigerian universities is the loss of experienced academics through brain drain and inadequate retention mechanisms. International rankings place considerable emphasis on the quality and availability of academic staff. For example, THE measures the staff-to-student ratio, academic staffing, doctoral training and institutional research productivity under its teaching and research pillars. The migration of experienced lecturers and researchers to universities and research institutions outside Nigeria can weaken institutional research capacity. Senior academics often constitute the backbone of research groups, postgraduate supervision, externally funded projects, editorial boards, international collaborations and doctoral training. When these scholars leave without equivalent replacement, universities may experience a reduction in research leadership and mentoring capacity. The problem is therefore not simply the numerical shortage of lecturers but the loss of research-intensive academic capital. An institution may have an apparently adequate number of academic staff but still possess limited capacity to compete internationally if it lacks sufficient numbers of highly productive researchers with strong international networks. From a ranking perspective, this can create a cumulative disadvantage. Reduced academic staffing can increase student-to-staff ratios, constrain doctoral supervision, reduce research productivity and weaken international collaboration. THE's methodology confirms that staff-to-student ratio, doctorate production and research productivity are explicit components of its ranking framework.

Inadequate Physical, Digital and Research Infrastructure

Another significant factor is inadequate physical and digital infrastructure for teaching and research. Internationally competitive universities require well-equipped laboratories, modern libraries, reliable internet connectivity, digital scholarly databases, research centres, classrooms, specialised equipment and other facilities that support knowledge production. This factor is indirectly captured in THE's methodology through institutional income and research-related indicators. THE explains that institutional income, when adjusted for academic staff numbers and purchasing-power parity, provides a broad indication of the infrastructure and facilities available to students and staff. Inadequate infrastructure can affect universities through several interconnected mechanisms. Poor laboratory facilities can restrict experimental research; inadequate

library subscriptions can limit access to current scholarly literature; unreliable digital infrastructure can impede online teaching and international research collaboration; and insufficient research facilities can discourage postgraduate students and high-level researchers from remaining within the institution. The infrastructure problem is therefore more than a question of physical buildings. Contemporary university competitiveness increasingly depends on research laboratories, high-speed connectivity, digital repositories, research databases, scientific equipment and technology-enabled learning environments. Consequently, sustained investment in academic and research infrastructure is essential if Nigerian universities are to improve their international competitiveness.

Weak Institutional Data Management and Limited Capacity to Participate Strategically in Rankings

A further factor is weak institutional data management and inadequate understanding of international ranking systems. Global rankings depend substantially on reliable institutional data. THE states that universities are required to provide and approve institutional data for use in the rankings, while bibliometric information is obtained through Elsevier's Scopus/SciVal systems and mapped to institutional data. This creates an important administrative responsibility for universities. Institutions need accurate, consistent and verifiable records on student enrolment, academic staff, doctoral graduates, research income, publications, international students and staff, research collaborations, patents and industry partnerships. Where institutional data are fragmented among departments, faculties and administrative units, the university may encounter difficulties in presenting a complete picture of its performance. Although THE has mechanisms for dealing with missing data, such as conservative imputation, the ranking methodology makes clear that universities are not rewarded for withholding data. Therefore, Ogunode, Olatunde-Aiyedun, and Mcbrown, effective participation requires universities to establish professional institutional research and ranking units capable of collecting, validating, analysing and strategically using institutional performance data. This is particularly relevant to Nigerian universities because ranking should not be treated as an annual publicity exercise. Rather, ranking indicators can be used as a strategic institutional performance-management framework. Universities should routinely monitor their performance in research productivity, citations, postgraduate education, international collaboration, industry income and other relevant indicators, identify weaknesses and develop measurable improvement plans.

Limited Postgraduate Research Capacity and Low Production of Doctoral-Level Researchers

The tenth factor is insufficient postgraduate research capacity, particularly at the doctoral level. This is important because doctoral education is closely connected with a university's ability to sustain research productivity and develop future academic staff. THE includes both the doctorate-to-bachelor's ratio and doctorate-awarded-to-academic-staff ratio within its teaching and learning-environment indicators. Strong research universities generally possess substantial doctoral programmes supported by experienced supervisors, research laboratories, research funding, scholarly databases and active research communities. Doctoral students contribute to research projects, publications and knowledge production while also constituting an important pipeline for future academics and researchers. Where postgraduate programmes experience prolonged completion periods, inadequate supervision, insufficient research funding, limited access to research facilities or weak postgraduate research environments, the university's long-term research capacity can be compromised. The effect can extend beyond teaching because doctoral research contributes directly to the production of publications and new knowledge. THE explicitly connects a high proportion of postgraduate research students with the provision of teaching at the highest level and the development of the next generation of academics.

Thus, strengthening Nigerian universities' doctoral programmes should be regarded as a strategic investment in global competitiveness, rather than merely an expansion of postgraduate enrolment.

Table 2. Consolidated Ten Factors Responsible for poor ranking of Nigerian universities globally

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- 1) Inadequate research funding and weak research environment
 - 2) Low research visibility, citation impact and international scholarly influence
 - 3) Weak internationalisation and limited global academic collaboration
 - 4) Weak teaching and learning environment
 - 5) Weak university–industry linkages, innovation and technology transfer
 - 6) Weak institutional reputation and global academic visibility
 - 7) Brain drain and loss of experienced academic staff
 - 8) Inadequate physical, digital and research infrastructure
 - 9) Weak institutional data management and limited strategic ranking participation
 - 10) Limited postgraduate research capacity and doctoral-level research production
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These factors should be understood as interrelated rather than independent variables. For example, inadequate funding can contribute to poor infrastructure; poor infrastructure can reduce research productivity; low research productivity can reduce citation impact and reputation; weak reputation can make it more difficult to attract international staff and students; and limited internationalisation can further constrain global research collaboration. This creates a self-reinforcing institutional competitiveness gap. THE's 2026 methodology, which allocates 29.5% to teaching, 29% to research environment, 30% to research quality, 7.5% to international outlook and 4% to industry, illustrates why weaknesses across these areas can substantially affect a university's overall global position.

4. Conclusion

University rankings provide useful comparative information on selected dimensions of institutional performance, although they cannot fully measure university quality. The analysis of Nigeria's performance in the 2026 THE World University Rankings shows both progress and significant challenges. A total of 24 Nigerian universities were ranked, three more than in the previous year, with the University of Ibadan and University of Lagos jointly achieving the highest position in the 801–1000 global band. However, no Nigerian university entered the global top 800, indicating a substantial competitiveness gap. Key challenges include inadequate research funding and infrastructure, academic brain drain, limited international collaboration, weak university–industry linkages, and insufficient institutional data systems. To improve global competitiveness, Nigerian universities and policymakers should strengthen research funding and postgraduate programmes, modernise academic and digital infrastructure, support and retain productive academic staff, expand international partnerships, and enhance university–industry collaboration. Universities should also establish research and ranking intelligence units to improve data management and monitoring, while promoting their research outputs through international academic networks and platforms. Ultimately, rankings should be used as a tool for continuous quality improvement rather than as an end in themselves, with institutional strategies remaining focused on teaching quality, research excellence, innovation, equity, and national development.

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