Strategic Planning in Saudi Universities Given World University Rankings

Dr. Abdulaziz A. Alsuhaymi
Assistant Professor, Educational Management Department
Faculty of Education, Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University,
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
aasuhaymi@gmail.com
Dr. Muteb A. Alhammadi
Assistant Professor, Educational Management Department
Faculty of Education, Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
muteb.hammadi@gmail.com

Abstract

The higher education sector in Saudi Arabia is striving to meet stakeholders' rising expectations; therefore, strategic planning of universities is complex and multidimensional. The strategic planning is influenced by government initiatives, world university rankings, and market demand. University decision-makers are increasingly paying attention to world university rankings because of the focus on internationalization and competitiveness in higher education. This study uses a case study to examine the evolution of university strategic planning in Saudi Arabia, including changes in its structure and focus and the potential impact of rankings on university strategic planning. We discuss the development of strategic planning at two Saudi universities by analyzing their strategic plans. The findings show that strategic plans have shifted from being general with basic methodology and no clear orientation regarding rankings, to becoming more readable, focused, and interlinked, considerate of key performance indicators and context related to reliable methodology and catering to rankings.

Keywords: *Strategic planning, World university rankings, MENA higher education.*

التخطيط الاستراتيجي في الجامعات السعودية في ضوء التصنيف العالمي للجامعات

د. عبدالعزيز بن عبدالله السحيمي

أستاذ مساعد، قسم الإدارة التربوية

كلية التربية، جامعة الإمام محمد بن سعود الإسلامية، المملكة العربية السعودية

aasuhaymi@gmail.com

د. متعب بن عبدالمحسن الحمادي

أستاذ مساعد، قسم الإدارة التربوية

كلية التربية، جامعة الإمام محمد بن سعود الإسلامية، المملكة العربية السعودية

muteb.hammadi@gmail.com

المستخلص:

يعمل قطاع التعليم العالي في المملكة العربية السعودية على تلبية التوقعات المتزايدة لأصحاب المصلحة؛ لذلك فإن التخطيط الاستراتيجي للجامعات يعد عملية معقدة ومتعددة الأبعاد، فنجد أن التخطيط الاستراتيجي يتأثر بعدة أمور كالمبادرات الحكومية، تصنيفات الجامعات العالمية، واحتياجات السوق، فيولي صانعو القرار في الجامعات اهتمامًا متزايدًا بتصنيفات الجامعات العالمية نتيجة التركيز على تدويل التعليم والتنافسية في التعليم العالي. هذه الدراسة تتبع المنهج النوعي بأسلوب دراسة الحالة لتتبع تطور التخطيط الاستراتيجي للجامعات في المملكة العربية السعودية، بما في ذلك التغيرات في هيكل عملية التخطيط ومحور تركيزه، والتأثير المحتمل لتصنيفات الجامعات على الخطط الاستراتيجية للجامعات، فيناقش البحث تطور التخطيط الاستراتيجي في جامعتين سعوديتين من خلال تحليل خططهما الاستراتيجية خلال فترة زمنية محددة. وتظهر النتائج أن الخطط الاستراتيجية للجامعتين قد تحولت من كونها خطط عامة تعتمد على منهجية بناء أساسية دون توجيه واضح فيما يتعلق بالتصنيفات، إلى كونها خططاً أكثر وضوحًا وترابطًا وذات تركيز على مؤشرات الأداء الرئيسية والسياق المحلي، مع اعتمادها على منهجية موثوقة وملاءمة للتصنيفات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التخطيط الاستراتيجي، التصنيف العالمي للجامعات، التعليم العالي في منطقة الشرق الأوسط وشمال أفريقيا.

Strategic Planning in Saudi Universities Given World University Rankings

Introduction:

Higher education institutions strategically plan their future to cope with rapid changes, demand, and competition around the world. Universities pay considerable attention to recruiting skilled faculty and students, enhancing infrastructure, and improving academic programs and student services (Dooris et al., 2004). Higher education institutions must meet the needs of various stakeholders, which are diverse and often conflicting (Alexander and Hjortsø, 2019).

Stakeholder theory demonstrates the relationship between universities' strategic actions and stakeholders' influence, as well as how strategic plans are shaped (Freeman, 2010). The intentions of universities relate to various factors, such as world university rankings, government plans, and market demand. For public universities, the government serves as the main funding source in influencing the universities' plans (Morphew et al., 2018).

Strategic planning

The early focus on the physical campus in the United States (around the 1960s) has expanded over time to include institutional governance, finance management, learning assessment, faculty workload, student engagement, and market division (Dooris et al., 2004). Strategic planning is deemed to be essential for universities amid competition (Usoh et al., 2018). While some regard strategic planning as a core component, others view it merely as a popular trend (Dooris et al., 2004). Nonetheless, it "remains a powerful tool for advancing a college's or university's vision" (Sevier, 2003: 19).

Strategic planning is influenced by several factors in institutional theory (Scott, 2008), including world university rankings, amid internationalization and competitiveness in higher education (Dowsett, 2020). Thus, strategic planning is used as an accountability measure by top management (Shore and Wright, 2015).

University rankings

According to Peters (2019: 11), university rankings have "resulted in a competitive race for reputation and collective anxiety among universities, particularly in Asian countries". As rankings indicate a university's quality and reputation, many countries strive to improve their rankings in order to attract more students and funding (Hazelkorn, 2011).

Opinions on university rankings vary from one scholar to another. Scholars have directed criticism towards rankings, citing issues such as their narrow focus on specific metrics, susceptibility to manipulation, and lack of transparency. Moreover, it is argued that rankings fail to adequately capture the nuances of institutional performance and overlook regional variations Kayyali (2023). Huang (2012) noted that half of the indicators employed in the QS rankings relied on reputation assessments via peer reviews, suggesting potential limitations in the validity of the metrics utilized in the QS Rankings. On the other hand, University rankings have had consistent impacts on higher education institutions (HEIs) despite concerns regarding methodological and technical issues. It is viewed as a novel perspective and an effective tool for identifying top universities. It is evident that global higher education stands to benefit from these rankings. According to Morphew and Swanson (2011), while higher education products and technology are challenging to quantify, rankings offer an objective input for discussions or assessments of quality in higher education. Balancing the argument is beyond the scope of this article, however, this article treats rankings as a phenomenon that impacts the higher education industry which is indeed worth considering.

Higher education in Saudi Arabia

Education and human development have been emphasized in Saudi Arabia since the first five-year development plan in 1970 (Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2023). This emphasis has continued to the launch of the Saudi Vision 2030 in 2016, which set key targets for Saudi universities. The vision includes developing general education, guiding students toward suitable career options, providing opportunities for re-skilling, and promoting flexibility in transitioning between different educational paths. It aims to have at least five Saudi universities ranked among the top 200 international universities by 2030 (Saudi Vision 2030, 2016).

The literature has identified the relationship between universities' strategic planning and rankings (Hazelkorn et al., 2014; Liu and Cheng, 2011), but few researchers have investigated the influence of rankings on strategic planning over time (Dowsett, 2020). Therefore, this study aims to investigate how the strategic planning of universities has progressed over time in Saudi Arabia, considering the overall structure of such planning and the possible influence of rankings.

Materials and methods

To address this research inquiry, a case study method was used to investigate the point of interest of a system within a localized boundary (Bassey, 1999). Therefore, two Saudi universities were selected purposively (Bryman, 2016) as they had focused early during development on strategic planning, making it possible to analyze the progress of their strategic plans over time. Strategic plans as documents "provide a means of tracking change and development" (Bowen, 2009: 30) and offers extensive coverage, encompassing a wide range of topics, events, and contexts over an extended period (Yin, 1994).
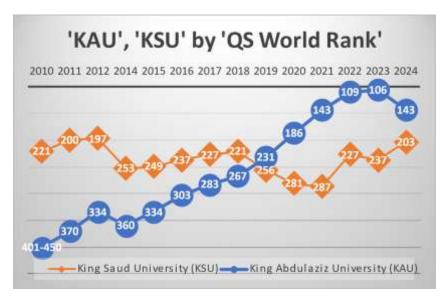
The two cases are King Saud University (KSU) and King Abdulaziz University (KAU). King Saud University (KSU) was the first university in Saudi Arabia. It was founded in 1958 under Royal Decree. In 1958, the university started receiving students after the establishment of its first college, the College of Arts (King Saud University, 2023a), which is currently known as the College of Humanities and Social Sciences (King Saud University, 2023b). Currently, it is one of the largest universities in the Kingdom regarding government budget allowance, student enrollment, and courses offered.

In 2010, the university formulated its first well-established strategic plan, the King Saud Strategic Plan 2030 (King Saud University, 2010). In 2021, the university updated its 2030 plan for the various reasons provided in the document (King Saud University, 2021). Specifically, two important reasons were observed. One reason was to be better aligned with the Saudi Vision 2030, and the second reason was due to the national interest of the university to serve as an example of an autonomic university regarding financing and administration (King Saud University, 2021). As such, two strategic plans will

be analyzed from KSU, which started its first plan in 2010 and updated it in 2021, referred to as KSU1 and KSU2.

King Abdulaziz University (KAU) was named after King Abdulaziz Al-Saud, the founder of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It was established as a private university in 1968 and was acquisitioned by the Saudi government in 1974 and transitioned to become a public university. It is one of the largest and most well-established universities in the Kingdom and serves the West. Three strategic plans will be analyzed from KAU, which started its strategic planning earlier than the KSU, and launched the KAU1 or KAU 1st Strategic Plan in 2005. The KAU planning is based on a five-year plan. The following plans are as follows: KAU1 (2005–2010), KAU2 (2011–2015), KAU3 (2016–2021), and KAU4 (2022–2025). The analysis of the strategic plans will be limited to KAU2 onward, as KAU1 is not publicly available and KAU2 parallels the timeframe for the analysis of the KSU plans.

Graph 1 compares the two universities in relation to QS ranking between 2010 and 2024. The graph shows that KSU was ranked 221 in 2010 and fluctuates over the years recording its lowest at 287 in 2021 and peaking at 197 in 2012 while was ranked 203 in 2024. KAU, however recorded a steady increase starting at 401-450 in 2012 and peaking at 106 in 2023 and recorded a decrease in 2024 at 143.

Graph: 1: *KAU and KSU QS results 2010-2024 (University Rankings.ch; 2024)*

The strategic plans were analyzed using a thematic analysis, which involves identifying patterns within the data and using emerging themes as the basis for analysis and categorization (Fereday & MuirCochrane, 2006). The strategic plans were also analyzed with respect to the QS world university rankings, as frequently mentioned in the plans from the initial examination. QS ranking focuses on different categories: academic reputation, learning and teaching environments, and research impacts. These categories are measured based upon a number of indicators, such as academic reputation (i.e., research excellence, academics), employee reputation (i.e., employers), faculty-student ratio, citations per faculty, international faculty ratio, international research network, employment outcomes and sustainability (QS World University Rankings, 2023a).

Analysis and discussion

Theme 1: Strategic plan design

This theme analyses and discusses the design of university plans. Data are analyzed and discussed in relation to four sub-themes: language, methodologies, benchmarking, and focus.

Language

KSU1 was written in a recommendation mode using the phase of "should" and had many figures of speech presented in a 247-page document. The vision statement was "global leadership and excellence at building a knowledge society" (King Saud University, 2010: 30). The wording of KSU2 was precise, with minimal usage of figures of speech in an 89-page document. The vision and mission statements did not change during this update.

KAU2 was designed in a narrative manner, without connecting projects to goals, and was presented in a 730-page document. It tended to use figures of speech, especially in the vision and mission statements. The vision statement was to be "a beacon of knowledge ... integration in formation ... pioneering in development" (King Abdulaziz University, 2011: 9). In KAU3, the language used was precise and goal oriented, with a minimal use of figures of speech, and was presented in a 63-page document. The vision statement was to be a "world outstanding university with sustainability and community partnership" (King Abdulaziz University, 2016: 34). The wording of the strategic goals showed that

they were built on success, and thus, included words such as "enhancing" and "improving" more often than words like "establish" and "create." Hence the slogan of KAU3 was "enhancement" (King Abdulaziz University, 2016).

KAU4 was designed to be meaningful and attainable with almost no slogans. As organizational values are usually left unmeasured, KAU4 explains how each strategic pathway achieves university values. Indeed, there were key performance indicators (KPIs) specified to measure such values. For example, the three KPIs linked to professionalism included: percentage of prize-winners among employees, world ranking improvement, and beneficiaries' satisfaction (King Abdulaziz University, 2022).

Approach

Both KSU1 and KSU2 used the Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats analysis (SWOT) as a framework for plan creation, depending heavily on benchmark analysis and gap identification. KAU2 used gab analysis and strategy development as a framework for strategy formation. KAU3 has an interlinked design that focuses on seven strategic pathways, seven goals, 28 executive goals, and 194 initiatives formed under overarching projects. The plan was divided into stages, from formation to execution, which were then linked to strategic goals and initiatives. While KAU3 was composed of projects, KAU4 was built around its goals. KAU4 is KPI-based, including four strategic pathways, four goals, 16 executive goals, and 111 initiatives. Both KAU3 and KAU4 used two strategies. They used SWOT analysis, previous plan takeaways, Blue Ocean, Customer Service and Innovation Strategies to identify focus and balance the scorecard and strategic mapping as a framework for plan formation (King Abdulaziz University, 2016: 26; King Abdulaziz University, 2022: 24).

Benchmarking

KSU1 was built according to a global benchmark driven by world-renowned universities, including Harvard University, Stanford University, and the National University of Singapore (King Saud University, 2010: 35). In the KSU2 update, several international universities were added to the benchmarking list including the University of Manchester, Ohio State University, Yale University, Johns Hopkins University, National University of Singapore, and King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (a Saudi university)

(King Saud University, 2021: 30). Initially, KAU planning did not include a benchmarking analysis, but it was introduced in KAU3, without stating the names of the other universities. For example, it used benchmarking against "…selected strategies from the world's top 500 universities" (King Abdulaziz University, 2016: 28). Furthermore, KAU4 used benchmarking against 20 universities, including national (e.g., King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals), regional (e.g., United Arab Emirates University), and international (e.g., University of Oxford and Cambridge) universities (King Abdulaziz University, 2022: 32).

Focus

KSU1's focus was holistic and comprehensive, covering a wide range of university topics, from structure, finance, and governance to the number of available courses and accepted students. The university sought administrative and financial autonomy and aimed to restructure its colleges and departments. The plan also aimed to reduce the number of registered undergraduate students (King Saud University, 2010: 192). From studying KSU1's plan, it is apparent that boundaries non-existent, for example an initiative to develop education at the national level was stated as "could be an opportunity to pioneer" (King Saud University, 2010: 162).

The KSU2 update made significant efforts to establish a framework of governance and resource allocation to establish the infrastructure for the transition from a government-run university to an autonomic non-profit university. The university took pride in its national achievements and translated them into an international strategic position. Hence, the updated plan raised its ambition to be among the top 10 universities worldwide (King Saud University, 2021: 63).

KAU2 is comprehensive, covering a wide range of university aspects, both organizational and academic, with a great deal of focus on technical infrastructure improvement. In KAU3, there was a balance between horizontal and vertical expansion, particularly in academic programs and research initiatives. Stakeholder inclusion was present, as was the enablement of women and youth. It showed a tendency toward efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability, which may be linked to Vision 2030.

KAU4 aimed to sustain its success (King Abdulaziz University, 2022: 40). Regarding stakeholders, the plan attempted to answer why it was necessary to achieve each strategic goal. National context positioning is visible in KAU4. One infographic shows how each goal contributes to national the Vision 2030, and another infographic shows the harmony between KAU4 and the universities' new system. The international context has adopted a different approach by concentrating on global orientation, such as sustainability. This includes the UI GreenMetric World University Rankings among the plan indicators.

Overall, strategic planning language in the early stages tends to be vague, general, descriptive, and artistic. In the later stages, the language used was precise, goal-oriented, realistic, relevant to internal and external factors, and contained minimal slogans.

The methodology in the earlier stages depended on SWOT analysis and benchmarking, but the link between how this information was gathered and planed was unclear. Planning in the later stages was based on performance management. For example, it was formed using mapping to connect goals, projects, initiatives, and KPIs to the vision and mission, establishing coherent and readable documents. Benchmarking was either non-existent or depended heavily on international benchmarking, while in later years, it used a combination of international, regional, and national best practices.

In earlier planning periods, the focus was wide, covering almost all areas of organizational and academic matters, while boundaries were sometimes unclear. This may be necessary when conducting an expansive overhaul in the development of all university aspects. In later years, planning tended to be contextual (i.e., national and international), focusing on issues related to accomplishing the vision and balancing horizontal and vertical development. As the recognition of global university rankings has increased, their influence on university strategies is evident (Dowsett, 2020).

Theme 2: Relation to rankings

Regarding how the plans were established according to world QS university ranking criteria, two main sub-themes emerged: how universities built their plans with regard to ranking criteria (e.g., QS methodologies) and the possible influence of ranking results on planning.

Design in relation to ranking criteria

From the analysis, the direct influence of rankings on the case study differs across years. Therefore, the direct mention of rankings and their criteria is highlighted, and indirect references are identified in cases where the influence of rankings is low.

There were some noticeable differences between KSU1 and KSU2 in terms of their rankings. KSU1 uses rankings among the criteria to identify benchmarks and best practices. It aims to be a pioneer in teaching, research, and community services on a global scale (King Saud University, 2010) but it is not clear how to measure these goals or what frame of reference is used. Therefore, there is a minimal mention of global rankings and their criteria as part of research-related goals such as the number of faculty publications (172), citations per faculty (173), and international research cooperation (204). There are, however, some goals that could possibly be influenced by rankings.

The updated version on the other hand, KSU2, was built around two pillars: achieving autonomy and upscaling world ranking (King Saud University, 2021). Therefore, the SWOT analysis results were positioned around the world's ranking criteria. In addition, most KPIs are directly linked to world ranking criteria.

Regarding how the KAU plans were established according to the QS World University Ranking criteria, it appears that attention to rankings was visible in the later stages of KAU strategic planning. As KAU2 aimed to develop the KAU technological infrastructure, it focused on rankings regarding online presence, such as the Webometrics University Ranking. Furthermore, it aimed to upscale its ranking from 496 in 2010 to 85 in 2015, with a ranking of 388 in 2023 (Webometrics Ranking of World Universities, 2023). KAU2 set a goal to develop 40 academic programs according to Shanghai Ranking standards, although it is not clear how this was translated into tangible outcomes.

However, only research goals can be clearly linked to rankings. For example, KAU2 aimed to be the first in the Arab World in research and had relevant goals, such as setting a minimum publication per faculty per year, 50% of faculty publications to be in Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) index, talent acquisition with excellent records, and faculty training on research

publications in ISI journals. In addition, several goals and initiatives can be indirectly linked to rankings. For example, the Faculty Capabilities Development Initiative was aimed at acquiring talented faculty, establishing partnerships for postgraduate international supervision, and encouraging faculty to attend conferences and visit prestigious universities. Another initiative aimed at advancing KAU media communication was to develop a global university image through university media pop-ups and to participate in academic events worldwide (King Abdulaziz University, 2011).

As KAU has witnessed a continuous improvement in its QS numbers since 2014, KAU3 (2016-2020) aimed for total organizational and academic excellence, while initiatives related to research can only be directly linked to world rankings. However, the KAU's main goal was "to be among the top 100 universities by 2020" (King Abdulaziz University, 2016: 40). The KAU QS ranking in 2020 was 186, as shown in graph 1; an improvement from 303 in 2016. In order to reach international recognition, a number of initiatives can be indirectly linked to rankings, such as talent acquisition, increasing the number of postgraduate programs, helping university journals to be listed on the ISI, and enhancing universities' competitiveness.

KAU4, however, was very directly related to world university rankings. There is an infographic explanation of how each domain within the plan contributes to upscaling university rankings in QS, USNews, Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), Times Higher Education (THE), Webometrics Ranking of World Universities, and the UI Green Metric. KAU4 rates these domains as strong, medium, or weak in relation to the aforementioned university rankings (King Abdulaziz University, 2022: 65). Another infographic includes figures and percentages of (then) current achievements and projections for 2025 regarding the QS Ranking, Shanghai Ranking, and Times Higher Education (THE) (King Abdulaziz University, 2022: 40). It is evident from review that the ranking indicators are matched to specific KPIs.

Possible influence of ranking results on university strategic planning

The KSU and KAU plans responded to the QS results. It can be difficult to directly link the plan orientation manifested in goals and projects to QS and ranking results. This is because planning time can take more than a year, and it

cannot be determined in what year planning takes place in order to directly connect it to the ranking results. However, the five-year results of the two cases were studied, and the plan responses were identified.

It is clear that KSU uses ranking results and indicators to pinpoint issues, especially in KSU2. For example, low or fluctuating indicator scores (see Table 1) were reflected in the updated version, including academic reputation, employee reputation, citations per faculty, faculty-student ratio, and international student ratio.

QS Indicators	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
World Rank	281	287	227	237	203
Overall Score	35.2	34.8	36.4	39.4	45.2
Academic Reputation	28.3	31	32	34.5	36.9
Employer Reputation	16.8	11.7	13.3	13.1	21.3
Citations per Faculty	15.9	19.3	23.6	29.3	32.2
Faculty Student Ratio	69	59.4	58.8	60.8	64.2
International Students Ratio	11.3	14.2	17	23.3	21.3
International Faculty Ratio	91.5	91.8	96.3	98.6	99.7
International Research Network	n/a	n/a	n/a	93.4	88.6
Employment Outcomes	n/a	n/a	n/a	83.4	71.7
Sustainability	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	75.8

Table 1: *KSU QS results 2020-2024 (QS World University Rankings, 2023c)*

Regarding how QS results affected KAU plans, according to the QS results, the university has witnessed a great improvement over the last 15 years. More specifically, KAU went from being ranked between 401-450 in 2010 to 143 in 2024, peaking at 106 in 2023 (QS World University Rankings, 2023b). It is also evident that the KAU plans have paid significant attention to indicators where the numbers were low or fluctuating (see Table 2), such as academic reputation, employee reputation, and citations per faculty member. Other low or

fluctuating indicators could benefit from greater attention, such as the faculty to student ratio and international student ratio.

QS Indicators	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
World Rank	186	143	109	106	143
Overall Score	45.2	51.7	57.7	57.8	52
Academic Reputation	28.5	36.3	41.3	48.4	54.5
Employer Reputation	36.8	52.4	65.7	70.7	61.6
Citations per Faculty	38.6	50.2	63.8	50.6	37.5
Faculty Student Ratio	71.3	69	68.9	66.3	52.5
International Students Ratio	60.6	57	56.3	54.3	23.1
International Faculty Ratio	99	99	99.5	99	97.5
International Research Network	n/a	n/a	n/a	93.4	84.4
Employment Outcomes	n/a	n/a	n/a	10.5	17.3
Sustainability	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	43.5

Table 2 : *KAU QS results 2020-2024 (QS World University Rankings, 2023d)*

From the above discussion, it is apparent that rankings in the early stages of planning were used as recognized ranking bodies for benchmark selection to identify gaps or to develop academic programs according to their standards. Only research-related goals can be directly linked to ranking indicators, which can be further explained by the fact that some rankings emphasize research criteria (Dowsett, 2020). However, in later years, planning was designed based on rankings. It was used as a design framework to identify gaps, set goals, and identify KPIs. They used tools to ensure that the planning domains were in line with the ranking criteria. All the indicators (in the case of QS) were covered. Ranking results were used to measure performance while watching the results from multi-ranking bodies (i.e., QS, THE, ARWU, etc.). Therefore, both universities monitor the ranking results and reflect them within their plans. However, not all low or fluctuating indicators received significant attention from the plans, especially academic reputation, employer reputation,

international student ratio, and employment outcomes. Many universities work toward attracting more international students and ensuring the inclusion of such targets in their strategic planning (James & Derrick, 2020).

Conclusion

This study sheds light on the evolution of university strategic planning in the Saudi context, finding that the universities in our case study used strategic planning as a tool to accomplish their goals and that rankings are a benchmarking tool to identify areas for improvement. Both universities' strategic planning was aligned with Vision 2030 and international standards. The plans' language was vague and general in its early versions, but it became more precise and goal-oriented over time. Additionally, the methodology shifted from utilizing a SWOT analysis and unclear associations between information gathering and plan formation, to a KPI-based approach with clear mapping between goals, projects, initiatives, and KPIs. Additionally, the benchmarking practices have evolved from using only international benchmarks to including regional and national best practices. From an initial focus on various organizational and academic matters, the later stages became more context-related, emphasizing vision accomplishment and balancing horizontal and vertical development.

The findings of this study show that rankings were used as a reference point to identify gaps and align academic programs with recognized standards. Nonetheless, rankings have become an integral part of the planning process. They are used as a framework to set goals, establish KPIs, and ensure alignment with ranking criteria. Universities actively monitor ranking results and incorporate them into their plans. However, certain indicators, such as academic reputation, employer reputation, international student ratio, and employment outcomes, did not receive significant attention in the planning process. Teaching and research are important, but more attention is given to research and publishing, and postgraduate courses receive a greater emphasis than undergraduate courses. Furthermore, academic programs in science and computer science are prioritized, while social science programs receive less attention, as the former is more aligned with university rankings.

While world university ranking is seen as a powerful tool to assess educational quality, there are however some causes for concern that are affecting the essence of higher education. Among these aspects is it assesses universities regardless of local culture, language and relevance to the local needs and aspirations. For example, it assesses research contributions through world recognized platforms such as Web of Science and Scopus which usually accept research written in English and other popular languages while Arabic, for example, is not among these languages, in which many Arabic journals are excluded by such platforms. In addition, rankings do not assess how well universities are connected to their national and local plans and needs and how it is valued by its community. Another concerning point is that it turns university work into measurable aspect by KPIs and metrics causing universities, at least in our cases, to pay much attention to goals and initiatives that yield measurable outcomes which can are comparable to world benchmarks. That in return could negatively affect attention to less measurable outcomes such as work environment and culture and community engagement.

University rankings, as an international framework for assessing university quality, are recommended to be integrated into the broader higher education policy. Universities may strategically allocate their resources to areas emphasized in these rankings.

This study is limited by its focus on only two cases within a specific timeframe. Future research should explore strategic trends in other Saudi universities and compare the Saudi context with that of other countries. Additionally, the perceptions of academic staff regarding their universities' strategic plans should be further analyzed.

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