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Strategic Reinvention of Quality Assurance Through E-Governance in Iraqi Higher Education

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Abstract
This research attempts to bridge the difference between higher education in Iraq and other universities in the world by carrying out an in-depth study and changing of quality assessment guidelines. Even with the new Iraq Ranking for Universities (IRU) system in Iraq, universities are still unable to achieve global praise because the method and parameters used are not well-designed or properly implemented. Analysis of global frameworks (QS, THE, ARWU) and the Indian National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) helped this research highlight certain weaknesses in the IRU's approach to research, teaching, globalisation, and reputation. In this paper, the system proposed in the study is unique because it matches international standards and considers Iraq's situation following the conflict. A consistent rise in research output was found, but improving international rank has not resulted. The suggested system uses qualitative and quantitative figures to highlight the study's impact, the quality of teaching, cooperation with foreign partners, and involvement in the community. The framework, if used, would guide Iraqi HEIs toward excellence, make better use of their resources, and eventually make Iraq famous again for academic achievement.

Keywords: University Ranking, National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), Iraq's Ranking of Universities (IRU), Higher Education, Quality Assurance (QA), Bibliometric Analysis

1. Introduction

Higher Education Institutions, help a nation advance by producing professionals, driving advances and supporting progress. Over the past few decades, comprehensive ranking systems have helped evaluate institutions' education and driven their improvements (Ioannidis, J. P et al., 2007). Because they measure multiple standards, these systems prompt colleges to improve, leading to several good outcomes for students, workplaces and everyone in society. With education starting in Iraq as early as 2000 BCE (Pir, H. T, 2024), this country has many strengths and obstacles when it comes to higher education development.

Figure 1: Historical Timeline of Iraqi Higher Education Development

Figure 1 illustrates the evolution of Iraqi higher education from ancient times through modern challenges, showing key milestones including the establishment of major universities, periods of conflict, and recent reform efforts. The visualization demonstrates the cyclical nature of educational development in Iraq and provides context for current ranking challenges.

1.1.Historical Context and Current Challenges

The middle of the 20th century saw the University of Baghdad and similar institutions recognized for their prestige in today's Middle East, following the ancient system of "edubba" (Kramer, 1949; Harb, 2008). Nevertheless, there were ten difficult and unstable years marked by foreign sanctions and fighting which caused numerous scholars to move overseas, as well as the decline of the country's research institutions (Ranjan & Jain, 2009). Since 2003, efforts have been made to gradually rebuild the research system by joining countries and making updates in their government policies (Kaghed & Dezaye, 2009; Makki, 2023).

1.2.Research Gap and Significance

Most of the Iraqi universities have not managed to score as well in world rankings as those in other neighboring countries. Though much research has been done on the quality of higher education across the Middle East, research on the reasons behind Iraqi universities' lack of international competitiveness and the steps to fix them is missing. Even though the current system was introduced in 2015/2016, it does not yet perform well compared to best practices found in other countries.

1.3.Research Questions and Objectives

This text focuses on answering these research questions:

1. Why do the Iraqi universities far behind top international universities in global ranking?
2. Is the IRU's approach to rating similar to that of well-known international ranking organisations?
3. How could the IRU framework be revised to suit international standards and meet the challenges faced by Iraqi higher education institutions?
4. This research aims to accomplish the following:

a. Evaluate and measure the IRU against QS, THE, ARWU, and the NIRF.

b. Use bibliometric tools to find out what research is being done in Iraq and identify what improvements can be made.
c. Develop a framework for quality assurance in Iraqi HEIs that helps them stay competitive internationally and relevant at the national level.
d. Create guidelines that policymakers and those in charge of institutions can follow to put the framework into practice.

The study helps by suggesting how to create a strong and consistent quality assurance system for Iraqi higher education that can improve the sector, restore its influential role in education, and supply qualified graduates to meet Iraqi development requirements.

2. Literature Review

2.1.Global Rankings and Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Rankings have grown in influence over how global society sees the quality of universities and how money is distributed in colleges. Despite using different approaches and factors, QS, THE and ARWU have become important markers in the field (Hazelkorn, 2015). QS gives 50% of its importance to metrics such as academic and employer reputation, while THE gives equal importance to the classroom environment, research and citations. Meanwhile, ARWU focus on research by devoting two-thirds of its points toward evaluation of research and faculty experience (Shanghai Ranking, 2023). When looking closely at these global agreements, we can see serious limitations. Marginson (2014) mentions that rankings give unwanted benefits to research and English-speaking universities over others that do not fall into these categories. In addition, ranking systems usually disregard important factors such as institution missions, aspects prioritized by the area and past challenges (Ordorika & Lloyd, 2015). For this reason, many countries have helped form national frameworks that respond to their needs and priorities.

2.2.Quality Assurance in Middle Eastern Higher Education

Many Middle Eastern countries have been able to use quality assurance policies, but to varying extents. Thanks to developed business environments, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have made it easier for their financial systems to meet international requirements and standards. Therefore, we see the productive cooperation between India and the UAE and the new IIT campus in Abu Dhabi, thanks to quality frameworks that support such projects. Still, political instability and reduced autonomy for institutions have slowed the progress of world-renowned universities across the region (Qasem, 2021). Many issues exist in the field because most of the existing publications offer case studies on individual countries and not a proper comparison between countries and the rest of the world.

2.3.Iraq's Higher Education Landscape: Progress and Limitations

Significant changes have occurred in Iraq’s higher education since 2003. Iraq has been established the IRU in 2016 by the Ministry of Higher Education and Science Research (MoHESR) and has carried out numerous quality improvement plans. There have been no significant improvements in Germany’s standing among advanced countries. Dakhil (2018) argues that Iraqi institutions lack global competitiveness because the IRU is not measured using international benchmarks. Since 2003, there has been a rise in research carried out by Iraqi institutions due to their alliances with partners from Europe and the USA (Faihan Mahmud, 2013). Yet there are differences in progress, with many fields and groups making only little impact in global research. Highlighting the improvement in Saudi Arabian and UAE universities’ international research standings indicates that well-planned investments and worldwide cooperation could set an example for Iraqi institutions to follow.

3. Research Gap

This study was undertaken due to the limited comprehensive research available on the gap being addressed.

1. The design and techniques in the IRU framework differ from those used internationally.
2. The relationship between Iraq's research trends in bibliometrics and its representation in world rankings.

From an international perspective, research has been limited to general issues concerning Iraq (Al Husseini & Elbeltagi, 2018) and broad regional comparisons (Badran & Badran, 2019).

4. Research Methodology

Accordingly, the study combined case study analysis with content analysis to provide a clear understanding of Iraq's higher education ranking system. Thee approach relies on two main components, as shown in **Figure 2**.

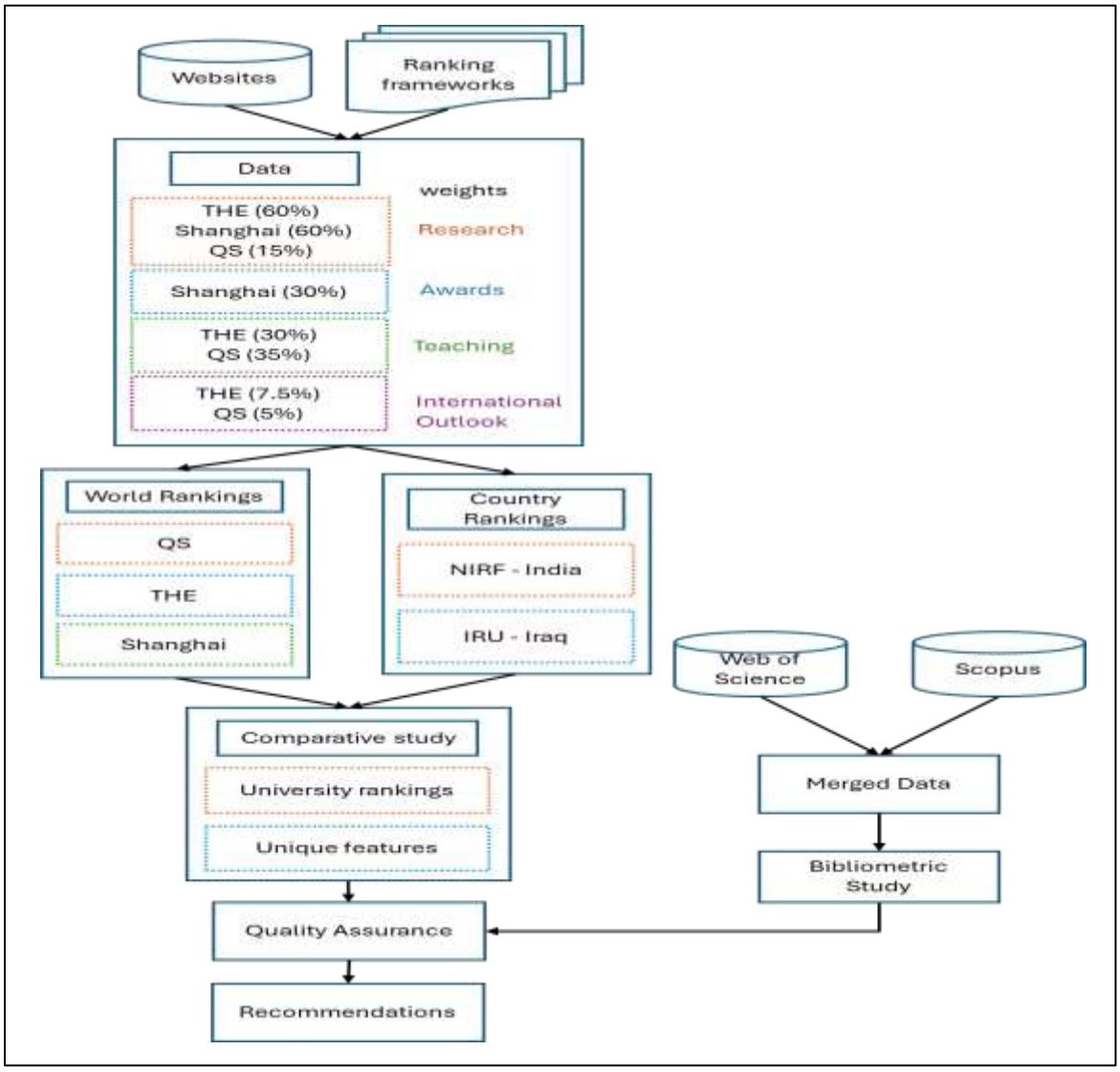

Figure 2: Research Methodology

4.1. Comparative Framework Analysis

The first method consists of comparing the Iraq Ranking for Universities (IRU) with the QS World University Rankings, Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings, Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) and the Indian National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF). Comparing findings from the research is done by organising the process into four steps.

1. From the guidelines for each ranking system the paper detailed each criterion and the weight they gave each one.
2. Rankings were reviewed for parameters grouped into similar categories and checked for similarities, differences and distinctions in their importance.
3. Gap Analysis: This paper highlighted parts of the IRU that are not consistent with international standards, with a focus on those points that matter most for rankings but are not mentioned enough in the IRU version.
4. Applying International Standards: The usefulness of international guidelines for Iraq's higher education was measured against what the top institutions can do, the main priorities set by the country, and available resources.

4.2. Bibliometric Analysis

The second aspect of the study involves a thorough examination of research papers published by Iraqi scientists and the pattern of their collaborations since 1983. This study shows trends in the research process and highlights ways to boost productivity.

4.3. Data Collection

The publications used for this research were taken from the top two bibliographic databases.

- **Web of Science (WoS)**
- **Scopus**

All articles written by authors connected to an Iraqi university were retrieved using the search query "Higher Education" AND "Ranking Frameworks" AND "Quality Assurance in Higher Education" AND "Higher Education Ranking Frameworks." Once the duplicates were removed, there were 130 unique documents in our collection over 42 years.

4.4. Analytical Methods

In this paper, several bibliometric methods were used to analyse the data.

1. Python to create maps of different kinds of networks and themes.
2. It provides an R package called Bibliometrics for data analysis on publication numbers, citation counts, and links among authors.
3. Research theme extraction and analysis using mining techniques to learn about their development.

These methodologies allowed to discern the pattern of Iraq's research, observe current levels of international cooperation, determine the central themes, and review how Iraq's work was being noticed internationally.

Combining comparative framework analysis with bibliometric research gives a sound base for conducting the study. From the comparative analysis, we have found flaws in how Iraq ranks competitiveness, and the bibliometric component gives us statistics that let us suggest how to improve the framework.

The **figure 3** showing increase in research publications related to higher education in Iraq over four decades. The chart shows reveals significant acceleration after 2003, coinciding with post-conflict rebuilding efforts, and demonstrates the growing academic interest in quality assurance and ranking frameworks within Iraqi institutions.

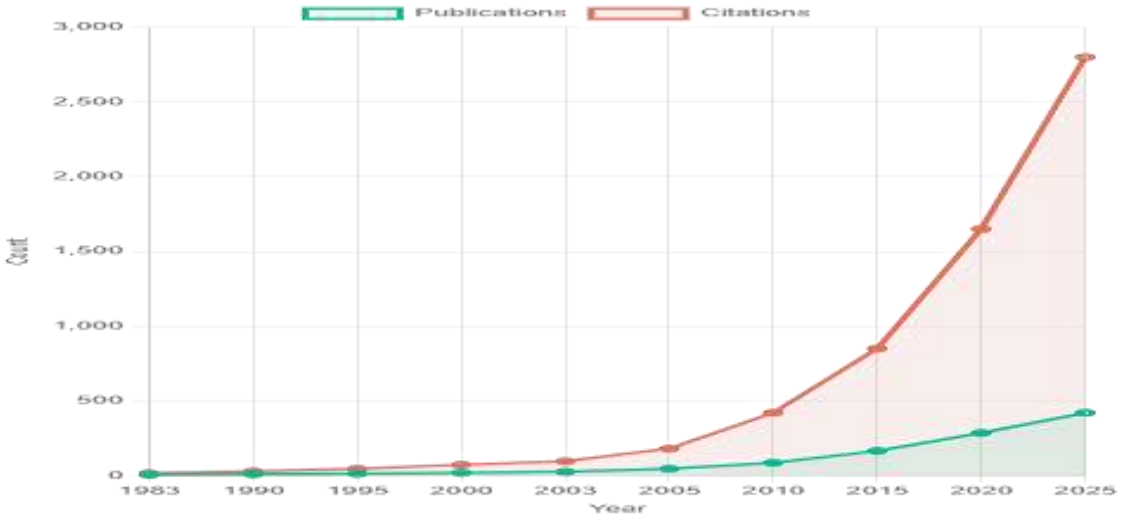

Figure 3: Research Publication Growth in Iraqi Higher Education (1983-2025)

5. Results and Analysis

5.1. An Overview of Different International Rankings

5.1.1. The QS World University Rankings

QS World University Rankings evaluate academic institutions (HEIs) on five performance indicators which include research, teaching, employability and internationalisation and sustainability. Table 1 reveals the weightings of each indicator (QS World University Rankings, 2025). Ten Iraqi universities were featured in 2026 edition, nine public and one privately-owned university, University of Baghdad, Al Nahrain University, Mustansiriyah University, University of Anbar, University of Babylon, University of Basrah, University of Kerbala, University of Kufa, and University of Mosul, and Tishk International University. The topmost university in Iraq has been ranked in 741-750 band. The 2026 ranking has used ten core criteria which has been judged on 246 institutions across the world and this is a wider and an expanded analysis. Interestingly, the number of Iraq universities listed in QS rankings has expanded considerably in the past five years, with 32 Iraqi universities currently appearing in the list (8 in 2021), of which the majority is operated by the state and a small number is privately owned. The ten indicators adopted in this assessment have been described in **Table 1.**

Table 1: Criteria of Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings

Lens	Criteria	Indicator	Weight
Research and Discovery	Academic Reputation	This indicator serves as a cornerstone for most rankings within the QS portfolio, carrying a 30% weight in the prestigious QS World University Rankings.	30%
	Citations per faculty	Citations per Faculty is an indicator of the research impact which is obtained by averaging of the citations to the size of the institutions and the total faculty numbers.	20%

Employability and Outcomes	Employer Reputation	Employer reputation evaluates an employer's views of the world and is based on graduate employability, contributing 15% to the World Rankings.	15%
	Employment Outcomes	Employment Outcomes measures graduate employability and societal impact, reflecting institutions' success in shaping meaningful careers.	5%
Learning Experience	Faculty Student Ratio	Faculty-Student Ratio is used to analyze the teaching capacity whereby the number of academic staffs is matched to that of enrolled students to illustrate the learning support.	10%
Global Engagement	International student ratio	International Faculty Ratio indicates international employee presence that leads to an increased diversity, cooperation, image and international research connections.	5%
	International Research Network	International Research Network quantifies enduring international cooperation by multi -country engagement and recurrent co-authorship of joint research articles.	5%
	International Student Diversity	International Student Diversity measures size and nationality spread of global students, enhancing culture, reputation, and learning experience.	0%
	International Student Ratio	The percentage of international students indicates the presence of Global students that increases diversity, cross-cultural interactions, alumni networks, and international reputation.	5%
Sustainability	Sustainability	Sustainability measures universities' environmental, social, and governance efforts, reflecting impact across SDGs and campus initiatives.	5%

5.1.2. Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings

This ranking launched in October, more than 2,000 of the worlds from 115 country universities are ranked under this ranging (Times Higher Education World University Rankings, 2025). The largest global university ranking in history. The University of Oxford maintains top position in the 9th consecutive year

with massive increase in teaching and industry collaborations. MIT jumps on to the second position, making Stanford go to number six. China keeps on expanding its research capacities in the world, reaching close to top 10. The leading five Australian universities on the other hand have gone down in the ranking and this is contributed in large part by a declining international perspective and academic standing. There are emerging economies such as Brazil, Saudi Arabia and UAE, which appear at the top 200 and represent the shifting trends of higher education in the world. The new WUR 3.0 league table based on 18 indicators of five core areas: teaching, research culture, research performance, business and industry interaction, and international collaboration, will be used in 2025. The latest version of the list was published with 2,092 institutions, among which 185 are new entries. These data have been gathered in 2,860 institutions, 472,694 datapoints of data, 157 million citations of 18 million publications, and over 93 thousand results of academic survey. Despite the fact that the UK and US remain some of the strongest actors, evidence has revealed a decline in the overall academic's image across the world. Further analysis, visualisation, and comments of experts are available at World University Rankings 2025 digital report, as shown in **Table 2**

Table 2: Criteria of Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings

Criteria	Indicator	Weight
Teaching - learning environment	1. Teaching reputation - 15% 2. Staff-to-student ratio - 4.5% 3. PhD awards per academic year - 2% 4. PhD awards/bachelor's awards - 5.5% 5. Institutional income - 2.5%	**29.5%**
Research Environment	1. Research reputation - 18% 2. Research income (scaled) - 5.5% 3. Research productivity – 5.5%	**29%**
Research Quality	1. Citation impact: 15% 2. Research strength: 5% 3. Research excellence: 5% 4. Research influence: 5%	**30%**
International outlook	1. Proportion of international students: 2.5% 2. Proportion of international staff: 2.5% 3. International collaboration: 2.5%	**7.5%**
Industry	1. Industry income: 2% 2. Patents: 2%	4%

In this ranking, there are only two Iraqi universities which is more than QS includes. The University of Technology gained the top spot (1001-1200), and Al-Iraqia University as a reporter.

5.1.3. The Shanghai Ranking (ARWU)

The Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) was the first to provide worldwide university rankings, with the main criteria being research accomplishments and faculty members. As you can see in Table, ARWU pays particular attention to Nobel Prize winners and highly cited researchers (shanghairanking, 2024).

Table 3: Criteria of Shanghai Ranking's Academic Ranking of World Universities

Criteria	Indicator	Code	Weight
Quality of Education	Alumni of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals	Alumni	**10%**
Quality of Faculty	Staff of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals	Award	**20%**
	Highly Cited Researchers™	HiCi	**20%**
Research Output	Papers published in Nature and Science	N&S	**20%**
	Papers indexed in Science Citation Index-Expanded™ and Social Science Citation Index™	PUB	**20%**
Per Capita Performance	The per capita academic performance of an institution	PCP	**10%**

This year, the University of Baghdad was ranked in Dentistry and Oral Sciences (201-300), and the University of Sulaymaniyah was ranked in Materials Science & Engineering (401-500).

5.1.4. National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF)

NIRF is an Indian ranking system provided by the Ministry of Education to rank HEIs in the context of the country. All the parameters are distributed with respective weightage, and the performance of the institutions on these factors is evaluated. The annual NIRF rankings seek to benchmark the Indian higher education system and its institutions by adopting a paradigm of quality and excellence [27]. There has been a tremendous expansion in the number of HEIs ranked by NIRF, tripling from 3,565 in 2016 to 10,845 in 2024. The categories, as well as the subject areas examined, have also expanded from four in 2016 to ten in 2024. Indian universities are ranked based on parameters set by the NIRF for scientific and arts & humanities streams. A list of the benchmarks employed in the assessment of institutions under the NIRF is shown in Table 7 (India Rankings, 2024).

Table 4: Criteria of National Institute Ranking Framework (NIRF)

Criteria	Indicator	Weight
Teaching, Learning & Resources	1. Student Strength 2. Faculty Student Ratio 3. Faculty with Ph.D. 4. Financial Resources & Utilisation 5. Multiple Entry/Exit, Indian Knowledge System, and Regional languages	**30%**
Research and Professional Practice	1. Publications 2. Citations 3. Patents 4. Research Projects 5. Publication & Citation in SDGs	**30%**
Graduation Outcome	1. Placement & Higher Studies 2. University Examinations 3. Median Salary 4. Ph.D. students	**20%**

Outreach and Inclusivity	1. Region Diversity 2. Women's Diversity 3. Economically and Socially Challenged Students 4. Physically Challenged Students	**10%**
Perception	Peer Perception: Academic Peers and Employers	**10%**

5.1.5. Iraq Ranking for Universities (IRU) Framework Analysis

Like any global ranking system, the Iraq Ranking for Universities (IRU) has limitations and areas for improvement. A comprehensive assessment is needed to determine whether the IRU operates primarily in a compliance-driven manner, concentrating mainly on fulfilling established benchmarks such as accreditation requirements, faculty qualifications, and student performance metrics. While these aspects are important, the system should also prioritize continuous improvement and innovation in order to promote growth. The IRU utilizes a dual-audit process, with internal reviews targeting academic units and external auditors focusing on larger organizations. The Iraqi Ranking Programme, launched by the Quality Assurance Department in 2016 as part of the Academic Supervision and Scientific Evaluation Authority, aims to conform national institutions to international standards. This initiative promotes scientific competition among universities, colleges, and departments to improve the educational process. The system aims to foster an environment in which students can excel across multiple disciplines while also encouraging faculty members to conduct research and meet academic milestones. In developing the IRU criteria, a thorough analysis of various indicators from international ranking systems was conducted to determine their relevance to the unique characteristics of Iraqi universities. The framework includes national indicators derived from quality assurance projects and academic accreditation efforts, weighted according to their significance. Finally, the ranking system includes 28 indicators divided into 11 sections designed to improve Iraqi universities' academic performance and global competitiveness (Salah Hadi Al-Fatlawi, 2023). **Table 5** summarizes the parameters used in the IRU rankings and the weightage given to each of the parameters.

Table 5: Iraqi Ranking Criteria for Universities

Criteria	Indicators	Weight
Institutional Accreditation	1. Completion of the self-evaluation report (2%) 2. Completion of a conformity report with standards (5%) 3. Apply for accreditation (5%) 4. Obtaining institutional accreditation at (8%)	**20%**
International Ranking	1. Shanghai Rating (10%) 2. Times Higher Education, Leiden Rating (8%) 3. QS, Scimago Rating (6%) 4. Times Impact Rating (4%) 5. Green Metrics Rating (2%)	**10%**
The Effectiveness of Scientific Research	1. The Amount of the University's H-index According to Scopus Indexes (5%) 2. Ratio of Research to Teaching Staff/Document Ratio (4%) 3. Total Number of Citations to the University (3%) 4. Documents Per Citation Rate Per Paper (3%)	**30%**

	5. Research Published in Cooperation with Foreign Researchers (3%) 6. Number of Research Papers Indexed in Science & Nature Journals (3%) 7. Percentage of Research Published in Local Journals Indexed in Scopus (3%) 8. Percentage of Research Published in Local Journals (3%) 9. Patents granted by foreign invention offices (3%)	
Community Service	1. Score for each Volunteer Initiative (1%) 2. Afforestation Campaigns (1%) 3. Activities that support student sports clubs (2%)	**5%**
Digital Maturity		**2%**
Faculty Members		**10%**
Awards		**5%**
Students		**5%**
Infrastructure		**5%**
Diversity and International Cooperation	1. Research fellowships (1%) 2. Agreements with international universities in of Foreign Students (1%) Shanghai ranking (2%) 3. Percentage of Foreign Teachers (1%) 4. Percentage	**5%**
Occupational Health and Safety	1. ISO 14001 certificate (1%) 2. ISO 45001 certificate (1%) 3. ISO 50001 certificate (1%)	**3%**

According to our findings, after 2003, research on higher education in Iraq has been steadily increasing as revealed in **Figure 4.**

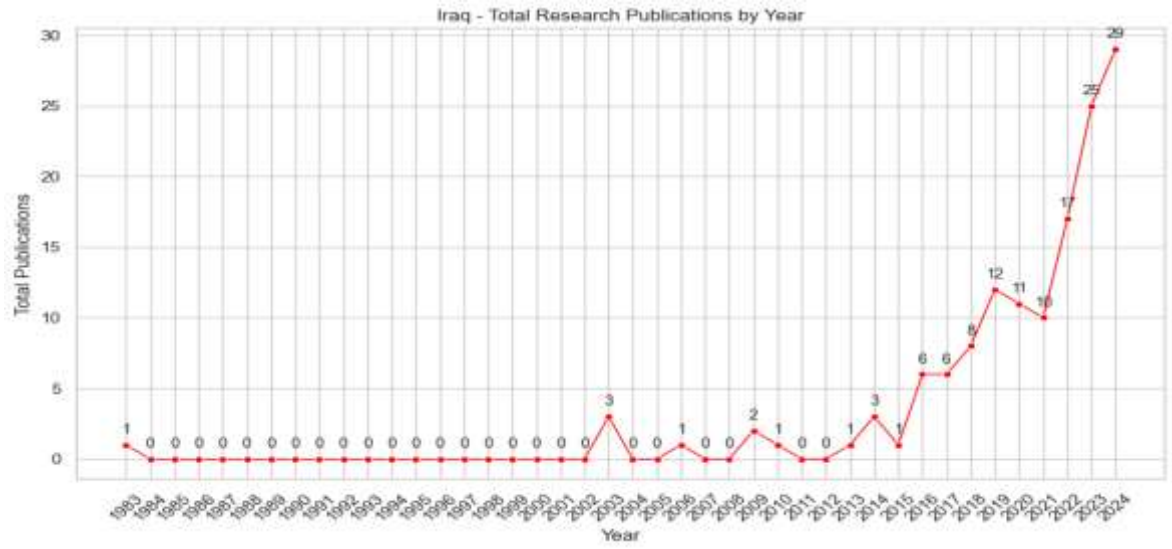

Figure 4: (a) Total publications related to Higher Education

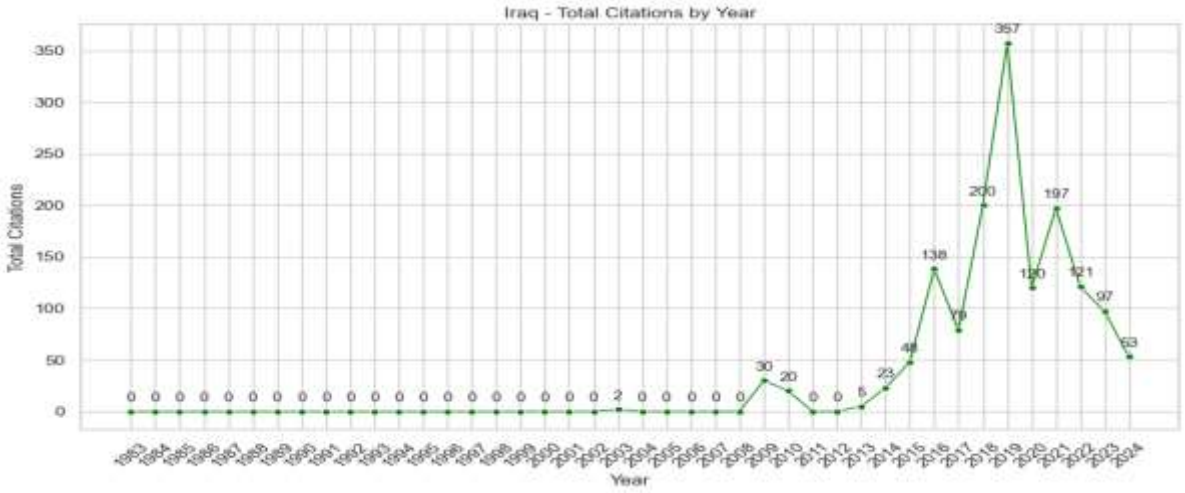

Figure 4: (b) Total citations of these publications

It is clear from the analysis that there is now a larger focus on quality cheques, accreditation, and e - learning in Iraq's higher education, an effort aimed at updating the system, as seen in **Figure 3**

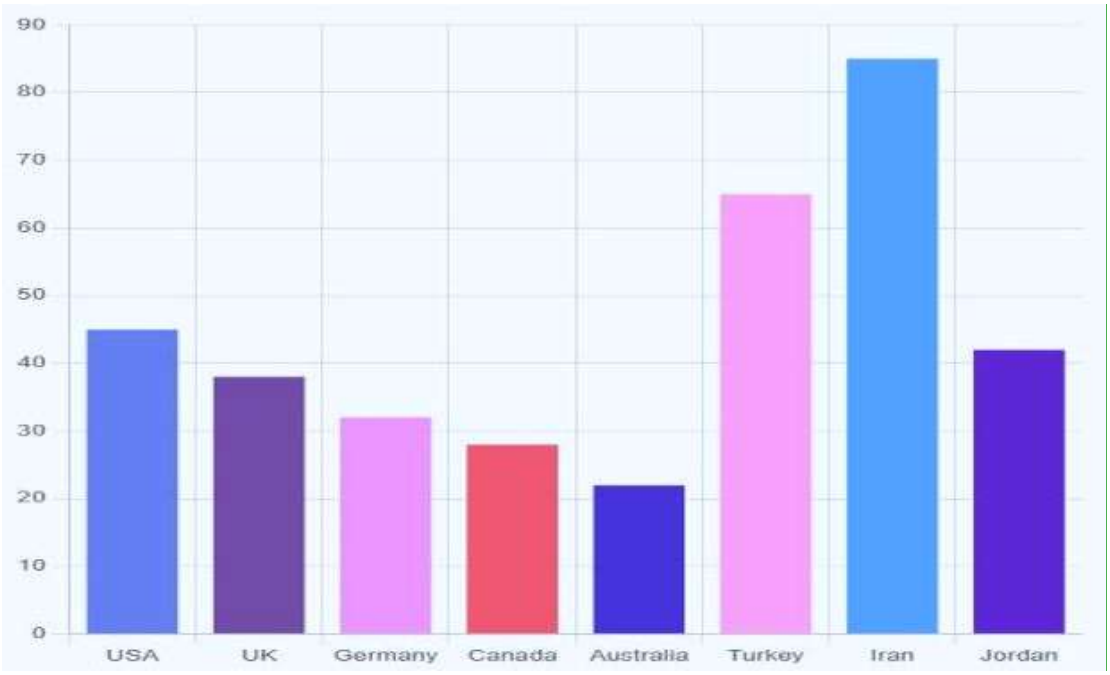

Figure 5: Trending topics in research related to HEIs in Iraq

The **Figure 5** displaying the distribution of international research collaborations by Iraqi universities, highlighting opportunities for enhanced global engagement.

Table 6 provides a detailed comparison between the national ranking criteria used by the IRU and international systems such as QS, THE, ARWU, and the Indian NIRF, revealing areas where improvements are needed. Strengthening these indicators and aligning them with international standards will help Iraqi HEIs bridge the gap and improve their global competitiveness.

Table 6 shows the criteria for ranking universities.

Criteria	QS Ranking	THE Ranking	Shanghai Rankin	NIRF Ranking	IRU Ranking	Recommended Enhancement
Teaching	Not directly measured	30% teaching environment	Not directly measured	30% (teaching and learning)	Based on local criteria	Implement standardized teaching metrics (25%)
Research	Not directly measured	30% Research volume, income, and reputation	40% Research Output	30% Research and Professional Practice	30% The effectiveness of scientific research	Enhance quality over quantity focus
Service	40% Academic reputation 10% employer reputation	30% Teaching learning environment	Not considered	Not considered	Not considered	Give it space to y
Reputation	40% Academic reputation 10% employer reputation	30% Teaching and learning environment	Not considered	10% Perception (Academic peers & Employers)	Introduce comprehensive surveys (20%)	Introduce comprehensive surveys (20%)
Internationalization	5% International faculty ratio. 5% International student ratio	7.5% International mix of staff and students.	Not considered	Not considered	5% Diversity & International cooperation 10% International ranking	Strengthen collaboration metrics

Through this comparison, several weaknesses are found in the IRU framework.

1. IRU Assessment of Teaching Quality: Unlike THE and NIRF, the IRU does not offer strong and clear indicators for measuring teaching and learning in its assessments.
2. The IRU skips out on reputation surveys among students, academics, and employers, as surveys count for 50% in the QS rankings and are significant in THE and NIRF rankings.

3. While the IRU devotes much importance to how many articles are published, only a small part is measured by their research effectiveness.
4. Graduate Outcomes: The IRU does not provide clear statistics regarding how their graduates fare in terms of work, pay, and further advancement in their careers, aspects that are becoming key factors in rankings now.
5. Major global systems place a greater emphasis on international work than the IRU and provide more measurable information on it.

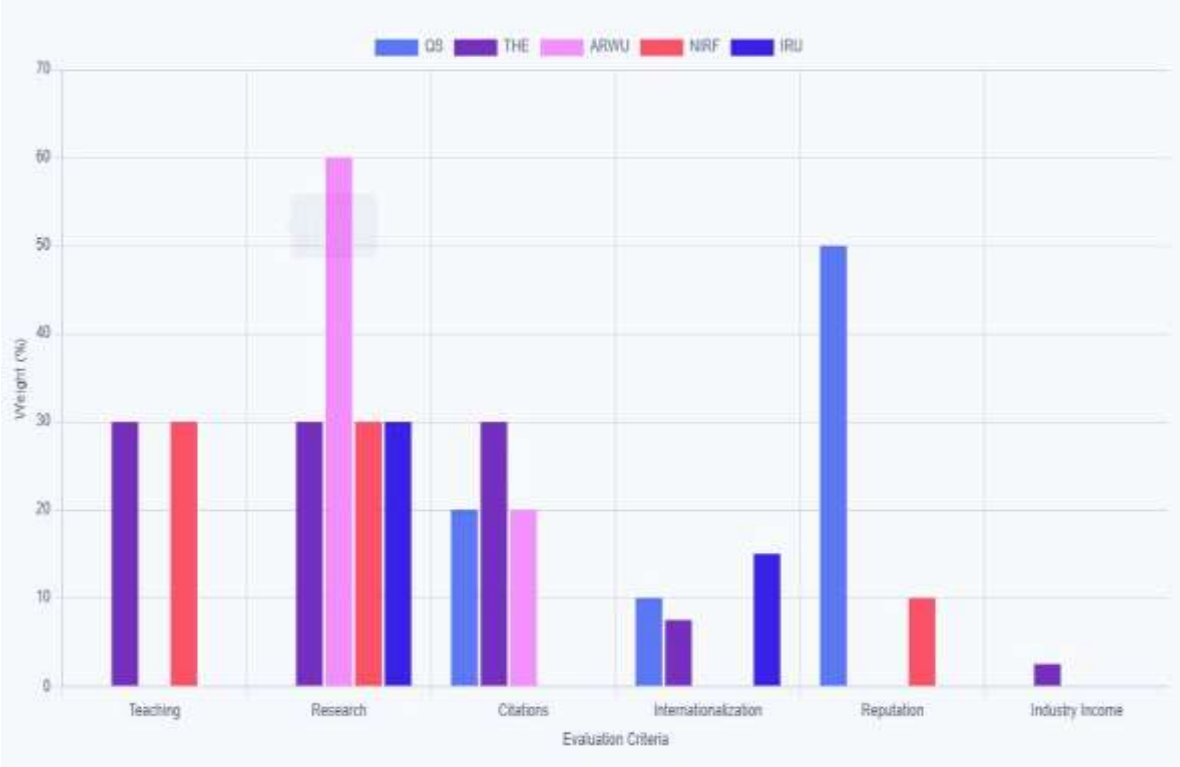

Figure 6: Weight Distribution Comparison Across International Ranking Systems

Figure 6 provides a systematic comparison of how different international ranking systems (QS, THE, ARWU, NIRF, IRU) allocate weights to various evaluation criteria. The visualization clearly shows the emphasis each system places on research, teaching, internationalization, and reputation, highlighting gaps in the Iraqi Ranking for Universities framework.

6. Discussion

6.1. Factors Limiting Iraqi Universities in International Rankings

In our view, important aspects are responsible for the small number of Iraqi universities in global rankings.

1. Language and Visibility Barriers

Publications in Arabic are not well-known outside the country and many university sites in Iraq are not easily accessible to global viewers because they lack much English content (Alhasnawi et al., 2023). It changes the reputation and citation outcomes used in most major ranking schemes.

2. Research Infrastructure and Funding Limitations

When there is not enough funding and insufficient science equipment and technology, it becomes difficult for researchers to produce outstanding publications (Jameel & Ahmad, 2020). The analysis we conducted

supports a rise in research publications, but we found that it is not easy to achieve high citations in journals recognized by ARWU, including Nature and Science.

3. Academic Brain Drain and Capacity Constraints

Many well-trained academics have left Iraq, meaning the nation's institutions are doing less research (Shadbash & Albakaa, 2017). Furthermore, staff members at these institutions are unable to receive proper training that would meet international standards for publishing research (Hussein, 2018; Kayyali, 2024).

a) International Engagement Deficits

Weak Involvement with Other Countries Iraqi universities attract fewer international recruits than seen on average worldwide which leads to lower scores on the guidelines where internationalisation is a significant factor. (Elkington, P., & Guttmann, R, (2024) highlight with evidence that attracting international students is a challenge due to the burdensome and costly process for students from other countries.

b) Strategic Framework for Enhancing Iraqi Higher Education Quality

The six-pillar plan we put forward can help Iraqi HEIs to improve their standards and compete internationally, and it is detailed in **Figure 4.**

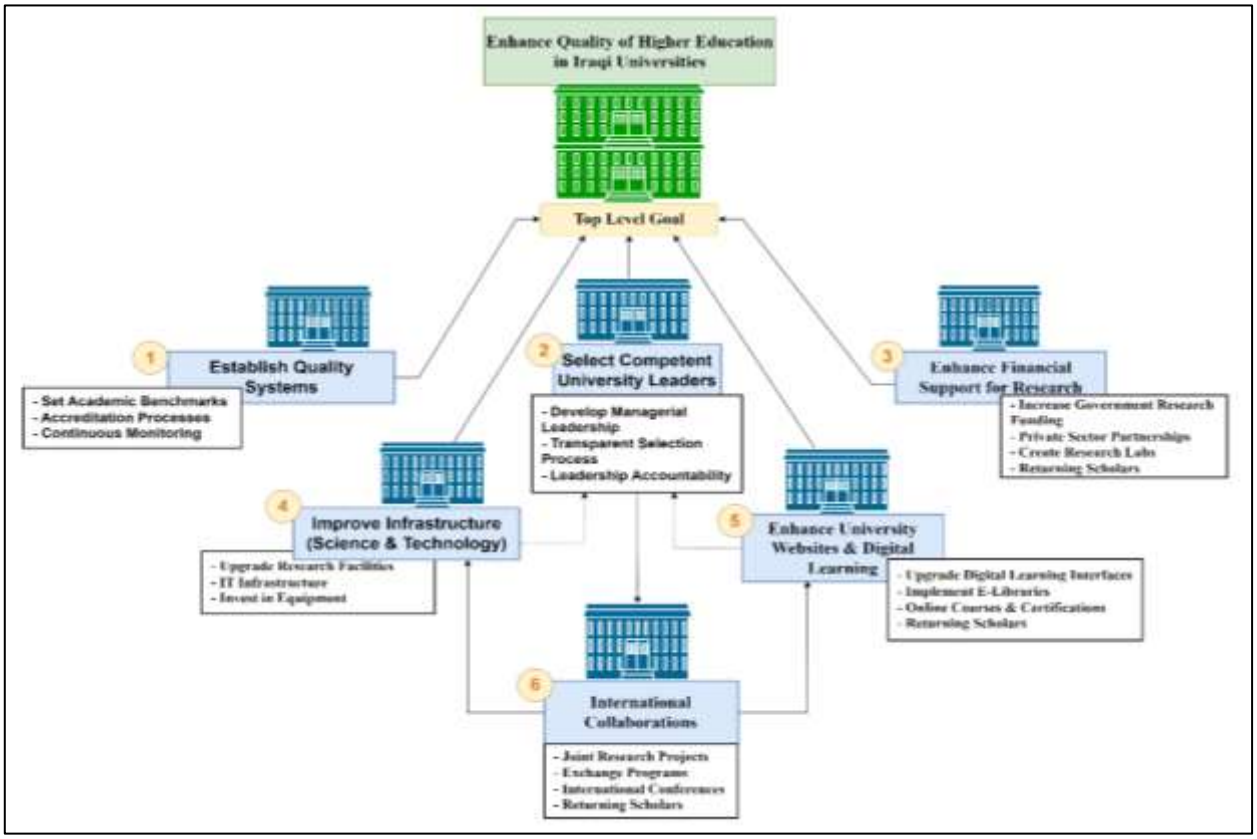

Figure 4: A Framework of Strategies to Improve the Quality of Higher Education

For Iraqi universities to improve, objectives should be set and institutions should be driven toward becoming recognised worldwide. The improvements should rely on six core principles, shown in **Figure 4**, all working together and aiming to raise the standard of higher education in Iraq. To achieve the first pillar, the government ensures that academic standards and accreditation methods are present in all institutions managed by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. Global standards and

rankings need to be used to make certain that these are still applicable and up to date in comparison to others. Succeeding in leadership means finding university leaders who are both skilled in administration and research. Strong leadership profiles are needed to help Iraqi universities succeed in their strategy and day-to-day work. Good leadership leads to better results in teaching and fosters more international partnerships. This fifth pillar is based on supporting financial research, thanks to more grants from the government and additional investments by the private sector. Initially, the goal should be to improve science, technology, and research facilities. Each faculty should provide research laboratories and organise an annual research programme for added advancement in their work. The need to modernise universities' websites and software is addressed as the fourth pillar. Improved technology should be used to link websites with apps and tools for online education. Modern education calls for great e-libraries and IT systems to aid learning and enhance the experience of students. It acts as a foundation for countries to exchange and share experiences. Both local universities and foreign institutions should be interested in forming partnerships for knowledge sharing, collaborative research, and exchange programmes. Joining forces will increase the quality of research done in Iraq and improve how universities in the country are regarded worldwide.

Policymakers ought to promote the return of academics from Iraq who are working outside the country. The knowledge they gain abroad is valuable and necessary for improving higher education. If they were to return, it would improve both the learning and research environments in Iraq. If Iraq's universities focus on quality systems, strong leadership, more research funds, better facilities, modern tools and working with partners abroad, they will advance and become more competitive worldwide.

8. Conclusions and Recommendations

8.1. Conclusions

The Universities assessment was based on global ranking systems and studied the research trend presence in Iraq. The data we analysed demonstrates that the problems in the structure of the Iraq Ranking for Universities (IRU) system are reducing the worldwide competitiveness of Iraqi HEIs. Even though the IRU sets a good foundation for standard quality evaluation, it still falls short in its method, choice of parameters, and how it operates, compared to QS, THE, ARWU, and NIRF. Based on the analysis, Iraq's research output has continued to rise steadily since the 1990s and accelerated after 2003. Still, greater productivity has not helped much in achieving a better international ranking; this suggests that the main reason for not getting enough attention comes from challenges with quality assessments and developing the right strategies at the institutional level, rather than producing more research.

After analysing the research, it is evident that Iraq's research output has been increasing steadily over the past twenty years, mainly following the events in 2003. Although research output in the country has significantly improved, its global ranking has not seen a corresponding rise. This discrepancy is largely due to challenges in quality assessment and the lack of strategic development, indicating that progress has focused more on research quantity than on comprehensive academic excellence. There are a few explanations for why Iraqi universities rank low in the world: (1) teaching and learning outcomes are not valued enough, (2) assessments of research focus mainly on quantity instead of impact, (3) there is not much international involvement, and (4) reputation measures are lacking. We conclude that, because Iraq is unique after the conflict, its quality assurance should balance international expectations with the needs of national education. Although adopting international approaches helps Iraq internationally, it must do so to overcome its own issues, such as issues with its infrastructure, teachers leaving Iraq, and insufficient

institutions. By adopting the six-pillar strategic framework, the administration would create a clear strategy that addresses both the world and nationwide needs.

8.2. Recommendations

Below is the list of recommendation which will certain benefit policymakers, leaders in institutions, and those in charge of quality assurance.

1. **Broaden Evaluation Beyond Quantitative Indicators:** Current ranking criteria overvalue quantitative metrics like publication counts, h-index, and citations. While these are important, they fail to capture the qualitative impact of research, such as its societal contribution, level of innovation, and interdisciplinary collaborations. Expanding the focus to include these factors will result in a more comprehensive evaluation of academic output and research quality.
2. **Reform Accreditation Practices:** Institutional accreditation can frequently be excessively complicated, focusing on paperwork and formal procedures rather than driving meaningful change. Accreditation should prioritise quality improvement and consider the impact on learning outcomes and student satisfaction. Shifting the emphasis from compliance to continuous improvement will reflect an institution's true academic value more accurately.
3. **Clarify Infrastructure Assessment:** The current 5% allocation for infrastructure evaluation is ambiguous, with no clarity on which specific components such as technological resources, learning facilities, or student support services are assessed. A more detailed and comprehensive infrastructure evaluation would better explain how these resources affect educational quality and the overall student experience.

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