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Internationalization in a Post-Soviet State: The Impact of Global Rankings on University Messaging in Uzbekistan

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ABSTRACT: *The pursuit of global rankings is a hallmark expression of internationalization in higher education. Critical Internationalization (CI) exposes the power relations embedded in these processes, yet their discursive effects in post-Soviet and transitional systems remain insufficiently examined. This study analyzes how universities in Uzbekistan negotiate internationalization pressures by examining the representation of global ranking criteria in discourse. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis of university websites, it identifies differences between institutions included in the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings and comparable universities seeking entry. Ranked institutions consistently present ranking-aligned indicators for international audiences, whereas unranked universities privilege locally oriented communication. The findings suggest that global rankings operate not only as evaluative mechanisms but also as normative discursive templates shaping institutional self-representation. The study extends CDA and CI scholarship by demonstrating how ranking regimes structure discourse, while highlighting risks of selective transparency and performative internationalization for policymakers and institutional leaders.*

Keywords: Central Asia, Critical Discourse Analysis, Global Rankings, Higher Education, Internationalization, Uzbekistan, Westernization

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, global university rankings have gained unprecedented influence in shaping university strategy, reputation, and policy across the world (Glass & Cruz, 2023; Hazelkorn, 2015; Pusser & Marginson, 2013). Systems such as the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings, Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), and Times Higher Education (THE) mediate what counts as excellence and create normative pressures for competitiveness (Shin, Toutkoushian, & Teichler, 2011). This influence is particularly strong in countries seeking to enhance their global visibility and legitimacy within higher education (Pusser & Marginson, 2013).

In post-Soviet contexts, global logic intersects with long-standing traditions of centralized control and state-defined educational quality (Anafinova, 2020). Uzbekistan's universities—operating amid rapid reforms to modernize higher education (Eshchanova et al., 2020)—face the dual imperative of aligning with global indicators while preserving national academic identity. Since 2017, Uzbekistan has undertaken comprehensive higher education reforms characterized by decentralization, institutional autonomy, quality assurance, and alignment with global academic standards. These initiatives form part of the government's broader modernization agenda aimed at transforming governance and fostering international competitiveness (Eshchanova et al., 2020; World Bank, 2022). One initiative, the Modernizing Higher Education Project, prioritizes curriculum renewal, accreditation mechanisms, and pedagogical innovation while introducing modern quality assurance frameworks (Krouglov, 2022; World Bank, 2023). These reforms reflect Uzbekistan's growing commitment to enhancing institutional accountability and educational quality. Within this evolving landscape, English has emerged as both a medium of instruction and a key marker of international legitimacy and employability, reflecting the increasing emphasis on English-medium instruction (EMI) as a driver of global integration (Rahmanova & Yangın Ekşi, 2023). Collectively, these developments underscore Uzbekistan's ongoing transition from a centrally controlled higher education model toward one that seeks to balance national identity with global visibility and accountability.

Though marketed as objective, global ranking systems embody Western academic values that privilege research intensity, English-language publication, and high resource expenditure (Hazelkorn, 2015; Marginson, 2014). In developing systems, these criteria often conflict with national priorities such as

access and teacher education (Anafinova, 2020). For Uzbekistan, improving international reputation through Times Higher Education (THE) metrics has become a government imperative. The recognition of Uzbek universities in global ranking systems is increasingly presented as a marker of national progress and educational excellence (Tukhsinov, 2025). Universities have consequently adopted the lexicon of excellence, innovation, and global competitiveness across official communications and strategic documents; however, the extent to which these discourses represent substantive transformation rather than rhetorical alignment with international trends remains uncertain (Uralov, 2020). The purpose of this study is to examine how universities in Uzbekistan navigate internationalization pressures by exploring how global ranking criteria information is expressed in their public-facing discourse.

Based on the academic context and aims of the study, we have identified three research questions that help us evaluate the impact of international rankings on the published discourse of Uzbek Universities.

1. Do the selected universities advertise information about themselves according to the ranking metrics of the Times Higher Education?
2. How accessible is the information for international researchers?
3. Is there a significant difference between how ranked and reporter universities advertise this information? We employed critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2010) to identify, interpret, and explain relevant information from the selected university websites to answer these questions.

Specifically, this study examines the websites of six universities in Uzbekistan to assess how they present their institutional rankings in alignment with the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings 2025 metrics. The THE methodology, under its updated WUR 3.0 framework, employs five pillars and 18 calibrated indicators to assess institutional performance (THE, 2025). We selected THE because it is among the most comprehensive, transparent, and academically credible rankings globally. Moreover, universities and governments frequently cite THE as a benchmark for policy and strategic planning, making it a salient point of discursive reference (Gadd, 2021) for universities seeking global legitimacy.

For the purposes of this paper, internationalization is defined as "[t]he process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education" (Knight, 2004, p.11). This definition was chosen because it is descriptive rather than proscriptive. By contrast, Westernization refers to normative alignment with Anglo-American academic, linguistic, and organizational standards (de Wit, et al., 2015).

Researchers prioritizing internationalization discourse on post-Soviet states tend to omit Central Asia, instead placing a stronger emphasis on Eastern Europe (Chankseliani, 2018; Pevzner et al., 2019). Similarly, while critical discourse analysis has been widely applied to explore university marketing narratives (Lewin-Jones, 2019) and institutional internationalization strategies (da Silva, 2020; Li & Eryong, 2021), it has not yet been used to examine how ranking-indicator discourses are linguistically and ideologically constructed within

Uzbekistan's higher-education digital communications. This study, therefore, addresses both a geographical gap—the underrepresentation of Uzbekistan in post-Soviet higher-education discourse—and a methodological gap, by employing a CDA lens to analyze how global ranking frameworks shape institutional self-representations in Uzbek higher education.

Focusing on six universities in post-Soviet Central Asia and their self-presentation relative to Times Higher Education (THE) ranking criteria, the study makes three contributions. First, it extends ranking discourse analysis into a post-Soviet context, where institutional identities are shaped by historical centralization and transitional governance structures (Azimbayeva, 2017). Second, it provides empirical evidence that THE rankings function as normative templates (Hazelkorn, 2015), guiding institutional strategies and aligning practices with global standards (Anafinova, 2020). Finally, the study proposes alternative discursive policies that foreground local epistemologies (Stein & de Andreotti, 2016), challenging dominant Westernized narratives and offering pathways to resist wholesale adoption of external ranking norms. It responds to recent calls (Gultekin, 2025; Hassan, 2025) to de-center Western assumptions in international education research.

The research in this study builds upon the theoretical framing of Critical Social Theory (CST) generally, and Critical Internationalization (CI) specifically. CST aims to illuminate structures of inequality (Calhoun, 1995), and CI highlights dimensions of structural inequality in the context of educational internationalization (Vavrus & Pekol, 2015). These dimensions include representational framing of ideology and identity (Hernandez, 2021; Suspitsyna, 2021), political and economic power dynamics and incentives (Beck, 2021; Leenen-Young & Naepi, 2021; Stein & McCartney, 2021), as well as the symbolic capital or prestige that comes from associating oneself or one's organization with internationalization markers (Crumley-Effinger & Torres-Olave, 2021; Kuzhabekova, 2024; Vital & Yao, 2021). This critical lens guides the framing of question formulation and data collection in examining the power structures inherent to discourse surrounding internationalization, and how universities in Uzbekistan frame their public-facing information in relation to them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hegemony of Global Rankings and Western Paradigms

Global university rankings, which define excellence through Western epistemic standards (Hazelkorn, 2015), pressure non-Western institutions to emulate models rooted in historically Western systems of knowledge and governance (Li & Eryong, 2021). High ranking positions promise access to international talent, funding, and prestige (Chou & Chan, 2016; Gultekin, 2025), leading universities to engage in what scholars term "Harvardization"—the strategic mimicry of elite Western universities as the perceived "gold standard" of global higher education (Adam, 2024; Wilson & McKiernan, 2011). This institutional emulation manifests in the adoption of Westernized policies,

branding, and performance metrics, often without critical adaptation to local contexts (Li & Eryong, 2021; Mwangi et al., 2018).

Such mimicry reinforces the hegemony of Western paradigms within internationalization discourse, perpetuating neocolonial hierarchies that privilege Western epistemologies and marginalize alternative knowledge systems (Haapakoski & Pashby, 2017; Hassan, 2025; Stein & de Andreotti, 2016; Zheng et al., 2020). In the post-Soviet context, this dynamic is visible in Kazakhstan for instance, where credential recognition mechanisms favor Western degrees over those from other post-Soviet institutions, illustrating how ranking-driven dependency operates regionally (Kuzhabekova, 2024).

Neoliberalism and Economic Rationales for Internationalization

Market forces frame international education as a largely commercial venture focused on revenue generation and individual consumer gain; this impacts how universities promote themselves to potential international students and faculty (Haapakoski & Pashby, 2017). Increasing international student enrollment numbers is widely seen as a lucrative strategy for revenue generation (Chankseliani, 2018; Haapakoski & Pashby, 2017; Lewin-Jones, 2019), with this economic driver being identified as the most decisive rationale among U.K. universities seeking students from former Soviet states (Chankseliani, 2018). Market-centered discourse is commonly seen among public documents and web pages for higher education institutions (Lewin-Jones, 2019; Saichaie & Morphew, 2014), with this public-facing discourse revealing the fiscal priorities of universities (Cover, 2016). University marketing discourse also promotes reputation building (Haapakoski & Pashby, 2017) and elevated individual prospects, such as employability (Lewin-Jones, 2019; Zhao, et al, 2023). Internationalization efforts that are broader and more inclusive of non-Western, developing, or transitional economies are marginalized in this neoliberal climate, as it is harder to quantify and monetize (Lewin-Jones, 2019; Mwangi et al., 2018).

Tensions over English Hegemony in Academia

Academic institutions in English-speaking countries have a geopolitical advantage in internationalization efforts, as English has become the lingua-franca of academia (Gultekin, 2025; Wang & Sun, 2022). International ranking metrics such as THE, QS, and Shanghai Rankings, which prioritize international research impact, international co-authorship, and international faculty and students, create systemic barriers to entry, especially in non-English speaking regions (Li & Eryong, 2021). This often prompts the adoption of English instruction or academic policies in an effort to boost rankings (Nurshatayeva & Page, 2020; Zheng et al. 2020). Academics and educators who do not teach and publish in English are often viewed as problematic by their institutions as they pursue policies that equate internationalization with English language (Eriçok & Arastaman, 2022; Haapakoski &Pashby, 2017).

There is a notion amongst higher education institutions of "global literacy as English literacy" (Romero & Shivers-McNair, 2018, p. 47), and English as the primary language of instruction is seen as the most significant trend in higher education internationalization (Hassan, 2025; Oleksiyenko & Shchepetylnykova, 2021; Romero & Shivers-McNair, 2018). Introducing English-only instruction policies supports the dual goals of entering and improving positions in international rankings, as well as enhancing research output and impact by attracting faculty producing in high-tier journals (Nurshatayeva & Page, 2020). However, English-only policies are a double-edged sword, as they may advance international ranking goals at the expense of student outcomes. In Kyrgyzstan for instance, the introduction of English-only instruction led to a statistically significant decrease in student GPAs and graduation probability, and an increase in the number of failed courses for first year students (Nurshatayeva & Page, 2020).

Geographic Gaps

Current literature reveals the prevalence of Western-centric frameworks, which often overlook experiences of students and institutions from the Global South (Hassan, 2025; Mwangi et al., 2018) and East. While there is some research on the experience of post-Soviet higher education institutions, it often has a more Eurocentric focus (Merrill, 2024; Oleksiyenko & Shchepetylnykova, 2021) as the experience of Eastern European institutions is not representative of the entire post-Soviet experience. Discussions of the impact of internationalization on Asian institutions often focus on the experiences of East Asian and Southeast Asian countries (e.g., Gultekin, 2025; Maghfurin et al., 2025; Poedloknimit & Punnanan, 2025), with China being dominant in the discourse (e.g., Wang & Sun, 2022; Wu & Ishii, 2025; Zhao, et al. 2023). Central Asia is often overlooked in the academic discourse on internationalization in higher education; even when it is mentioned it often focuses on experiences from Kyrgyzstan (e.g., Merrill, 2024; Nurshatayeva & Page, 2020) or Kazakhstan (e.g., Kuzhabekova, 2024).

Uzbekistan is largely absent from the academic discourse on internationalization in higher education (aside from scholarship like Alimukhamedov, 2020), despite being the most populous state in central Asia. This exclusion itself is an example of a Westernization bias in academia, which sees Eastern Europe as representative of the post-Soviet experience, unlike the true ethnicized diversity among the post-Soviet states. Even recent calls for research on internationalization within post-Soviet contexts tend to privilege Eastern European perspectives while neglecting non-European post-Soviet experiences, including those of Uzbekistan. As a result, the complex ways in which Uzbek higher education institutions (HEIs) navigate global pressures—such as international rankings and English-medium instruction—are insufficiently documented in the international literature. To date, no studies have examined internationalization or Westernization processes in Uzbek HEIs through a critical discourse lens.

Methodological gaps in discursive texts analysis

While CDA is a well-established method for uncovering power and bias in internationalization discourse, it has been insufficiently applied to the specific intersection of public-facing marketing of non-Western, non-elite institutions. CDA studies which analyze public facing discourse, such as university website content, often focus on institutions in the U.S. or U.K. (Cover, 2016; Lewin-Jones, 2019) and focus on those institutions that are highly ranked (Wang & Sun, 2022). However, we are unable to locate any CDA study specifically conducted of lower-ranked institutions, or unranked institutions actively pursuing international ranking. CDA studies analysing institutional strategic documents find a wide gap between theory and practice (Eriçok & Arastaman, 2022; Hassan, 2025). Although there has been coverage of how CDA explores overarching internationalization goals, there is a lack of direct analysis demonstrating how specific ranking indicators impact public-facing discourse or if they influence institutions to alter their advertised website content.

METHOD

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a rigorous lens for examining how institutional language constructs, enacts, and normalizes power. It is particularly suited to investigating higher education contexts, where discourses of excellence and global competitiveness often conceal deeper hierarchies of knowledge and legitimacy. This study draws on Fairclough's (2010) three-dimensional model to analyze how universities in Uzbekistan articulate internationalization and global legitimacy through their online self-representations.

Fairclough's approach allows this study to examine not only what universities communicate on their websites but also how these discursive patterns reproduce broader ideologies of Westernization, hierarchy, and global academic legitimacy. Such an approach treats institutional websites as "texts" in which linguistic and visual choices function as social practices that sustain particular worldviews (Boateng & Israel, 2022; Fairclough, 2010).

Sampling and Participants

The sample included three ranked universities and three "Reporter" institutions, which are actively seeking a ranking by sending requisite relevant information and documentation to the THE: (a) Tashkent Institute of Irrigation and Agricultural Mechanisation Engineers (TIIAME NRU) – ranked 601–800, (b) National University of Uzbekistan (NUUz) – ranked 1001–1200, (c) Tashkent University of Information Technologies (TUIT) – ranked 1501+, d) Tashkent State University of Economics (TSUE) – Reporter, (e) Tashkent State University of Law (TSUL) – Reporter, and (f) Uzbekistan State University of World Languages (UzSWLU) – Reporter. These six institutions were chosen for their

comparable prestige, student population size, and shared location in Tashkent, Uzbekistan's capital.

Data Collection and Analysis

To best discern how several Uzbek universities present themselves to global audiences, we analyzed the published information on their official websites in Fall 2025. Following Fairclough's three-dimensional model (2010), our focus for Step 1–Text (Description) was to systematically review each website, looking for information that aligned with the five metrics and eighteen indicators of the Times Higher Education ranking methodology (Figure 1). We prioritized what words and images were present or absent.

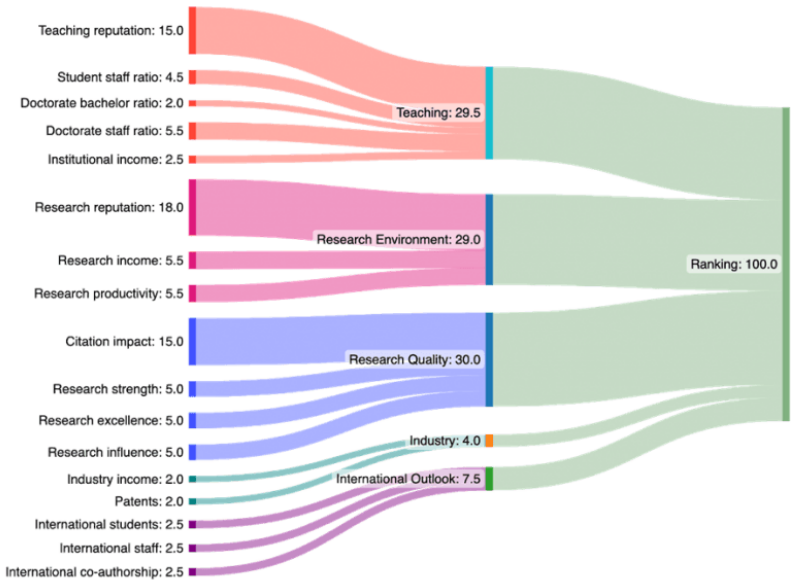

Figure 1. Times Higher Education (THE) University Ranking Methodology (Times Higher Education, 2025)

For Step 2–Interaction (Interpretation), we explored how we, as the researchers, were able to consume the website information. And for Step 3–Context (Explanation), we explored using Critical Internationalization (Vavrus & Pekol, 2015) and our experiential knowledge from our social locations. Data were analyzed via discussion, reflexive memoing, and thematic coding amongst the authors of the paper, one of whom is local, an ethnically Russian Uzbek citizen from Tashkent (Sofianova). Of the two who are U.S. citizens, one lives in Uzbekistan and was a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant at an Uzbek university for two years (Rothwell), and the other lives in the U.S. (Smotherson).

The research was guided by the component indicators of the five-teaching metrics: (a)Teaching Quality, (b) Research Environment, (c) Research Quality, Industry, and (d) International Outlook. The indicators for Teaching Reputation and Research Reputation (component indicators of Teaching Quality and Research Environment, respectively) were excluded from the analysis because they derive from confidential, invitation-only surveys conducted by Times Higher Education and therefore cannot be reported independently by institutions. The remaining indicators across all five metrics were included in the study, as they rely on institutionally reportable or publicly accessible data. We looked for information relating to these specific indicators on the selected university websites and assessed the accessibility of the information for international researchers and noted the specific wording or medium in which the information was presented.

For each university, researchers documented: (a) The presence or absence of information corresponding to each THE indicator, (b) the number of clicks from the homepage required to reach indicator-relevant content, and (c) the available language interfaces. If a page contained untranslated graphs or data in Uzbek/Russian only, the limitation was noted. Screenshots and direct quotations were recorded in an audit log.

Ethical Considerations

It is noteworthy that Uzbek institutions often take published criticism from foreign sources more seriously than that from local sources. This paper is co-authored by three individuals, one of whom is an Uzbek citizen and two of whom are United States citizens. Thus, we recognize that the results of this research may have a wider readership and greater impact than they would if authored solely by a researcher from Uzbekistan. The authors of this study are not in any way affiliated with the universities selected as research subjects. This study analyzed publicly available institutional website content and did not involve human subjects, interviews, or the collection of personal or identifiable data, so no Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was required.

RESULTS

Commonly Presented and Omitted Information

No university fully advertised its information according to THE ranking metrics, but clear trends emerged in which metrics were more or less likely to have information publicly advertised on university websites. Information on international outlook was at least partially presented by all sampled universities; however, none fully met the metric indicators. Information regarding research quality was the least likely to be presented.

Table 1: Presence of information indicators for THE metrics

University	Teaching	Research Environment	Research Quality	Industry	International Outlook
TIIAME-NRU*	Partially	Yes	No	Yes	Partially
NUUz*	Partially	Partially	Partially	Yes	Partially
TUIT*	Partially	Partially	No	Yes	Paritally
TSUE	No	Partially	No	No	Partially
TSUL	Partially	No	No	Partially	Partially
UzSWLU	No	No	no	No	Partially

**University ranked in the Times Higher Education international university ranking list for 2025*

The four universities that at least partially advertised their teaching all did so in ways that highlighted faculty statistics in relation to Soviet academic hierarchies. Specific numbers were included for faculty members who held PhD or Doctor of Science (DSc) degrees, with TSUL including numbers for "Candidates of Science" (understood to mean someone pursuing a DSc), and TIIAME including numbers of "academicians" (understood to mean the highest rank in a Soviet academic hierarchy who conducts research and advises other researchers). However, none of the universities advertised information regarding the staff-student ratio.

Universities were more likely to advertise the quantity of their research than its quality. TIIAME and TUIT both presented quantitative data on their research with precision. See this excerpt from TIIAME's website as an example:

> Scientific-research works carried out within state scientific and technical programs and business contracts- There are 4 fundamental, 3 practical and 3 innovative grants projects, more than 19 scientific, research, and experimental-design and economic agreements with organizations, more than 63 scientific publications on the initiative of the State budget research works are carried out. Total amount of 3 State Grant Based Practical researches – 906,889 mln.soum, Fundamental Researches on 4 State Grants – 1162,154 mln.soum, 3 Grant-Based Innovative Projects – 1048,378 mln.soum, the total cost of 19 other scientific researches on the basis of agricultural contracts is 962,5 mln.soum. At the institute, the total amount of off-budget founds is 4 b. 79,921 mln.soum . / Results of scientific research works- According to the results of scientific research carried out in every year by the scientists of the institute:- 74 monographs, 39 textbooks, 119 manuals 512 articles and conference proceedings were published on the Scopus journals and as well as Web of Science scientific database; 333 papers were published on foreign scientific journals; 405 papers were published on international conferences; 561 papers in the republican scientific journals; 303

scientific and methodical works are published in collections of republican scientific conferences

Information on research quality is absent from all but one sampled website. NUUz does so in a way that casts doubt on its accuracy. A section of the "Competitiveness in the International Education Market" infographic from the "University in Numbers" section presents statistics on "quotes" from scientific publications (assumed to be citations of articles published by university faculty) presented in the thousands (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Increasing International Scientific Publications

All universities reporting industry-related information advertise quantitative data on patents obtained by university researchers. Similarly to the findings for research quality, the information is presented in a way that casts doubt on its accuracy, with TIIAME claiming "there are 5 patents for inventions, more than 6 patents for utility models, and about 105 copyright certificates per year."

Every university sampled at least partially advertised information on their international outlook. Every website included application information for prospective international students, although with varying tones. TIIAME states on their admissions page "Please click the link below for information on foreign citizens," and UzSWLU advertises on their homepage,

> To the attention of foreign applicants! Would you like to study at the Uzbek State University of World Languages? Just click the link and register! Currently, the university is actively cooperating with over 180 higher education institutions around the world.

Although not a measured indicator under the THE metric for international outlook, every university included international partnerships and collaborations on the homepage of its website. None of the universities shared information on the international co-authorship indicator.

Information Accessibility and Intended Audience

The positioning and accessibility of information on a website reveal which information is prioritized by the presenter and reveal what information they assume their intended audience is seeking (Fairclough, 2010). The information most accessible, based on the number of clicks required across all universities, was related to international outlook. The least accessible information was related to research quality.

Table 2: Average number of clicks to access relevant information from the homepage

University	Teaching	Research Environment	Research Quality	Industry	International Outlook
TIIAME-NRU*	2	2	n/a	2	0
NUUz*	3	3	3	2.5	1.5
TUIT*	3	2	n/a	2	3
TSUE	n/a	4	n/a	n/a	2
TSUL	4	n/a	n/a	4	2
UzSWLU	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	2

** University ranked in the Times Higher Education List for 2025*

The languages available revealed insights into the intended audience. In Uzbekistan, the primary languages used are Uzbek and Russian, and all surveyed websites presented fully available information in these languages. However, English, Chinese, and German are not widely used by the local population, and thus reveal an intended audience outside of Uzbekistan, such as potential international project partners, prospective staff or students, or international researchers and reporting bodies. Information available only in local languages indicates a local intended audience, such as current or prospective local staff and students, or Uzbek government bodies.

Table 3: Language Interfaces Offered

University	Languages
Tashkent Institute of Irrigation and Agricultural Mechanisation Engineers (TIIAME-NRU)*	Uzbek, Russian, English, Chinese
National University of Uzbekistan Named after Mirzo Ulugbek (NUUz)*	Uzbek, Russian English
Tashkent University of Information Technologies (TUIT)*	Uzbek, Russian, English, German
Tashkent State University of Economics (TSUE)	Uzbek, Russian, English
Tashkent State University of Law (TSUL)	Uzbek, Russian, English
Uzbekistan State University of World Languages (UzSWLU)	Uzbek, Russian, English, Chinese

** University ranked in the Times Higher Education List for 2025*

Although all universities listed English as a potential language option for the website, its availability was inconsistent, even when the English interface was enabled. TSUE, for example, advertises a list of articles published by their faculty in SCOPUS-listed journals. However, the information is only available via a link to a downloadable spreadsheet in Uzbek. TSUL frequently employs charts and tables that display information only in Uzbek or Russian, whereas NUUz also employs charts, tables, and infographics, but optimizes them for availability in all listed language interfaces. UzSWLU also includes full English language functionality throughout the website.

Discrepancies Between Ranked and Reporter Universities

The three ranked universities consistently provided more information according to THE's ranking metrics, and in a way that is more accessible to researchers than the three unranked universities. Of the three ranked universities, one of them (NUUz) included either full or partial information for all five of the ranking metrics, and two of the universities (TIIAME, TUIT) included either full or partial information for four of the five ranking metrics, with an average of 4.6 of the five ranking metrics being either fully or partially represented by the information on the websites. The ranked universities also took an average of 2.2 clicks to access the information relevant to the ranking metrics. Two of the three ranked universities included availability and functionality in additional languages other than Uzbek, Russian, and English (TIIAME, TUIT), and the English-language websites were more likely to be fully functional.

Of the unranked universities, none offered full or partial information for all five ranking metrics. One of them (TSUL) offered either full or partial information for three of the five ranking metrics, one (TSUE) offered information on two of the five ranking metrics, and one (UzSWLU) offered information on only one of the five ranking metrics, with an average of just two of the five ranking metrics being either fully or partially represented on the websites of the non-ranked universities.

DISCUSSION

It is clear from the results that global rankings metrics have some measurable impact on the way that universities in Uzbekistan present information about themselves on their websites. The sampled universities which have already achieved rankings position information in a way that is more accessible to international audiences and are more likely to publicly advertise information that international ranking bodies monitor. This positioning for international rankings plays into the existing power structures and dimensions of structural inequality in the context of educational internationalization (Vavrus & Pekol, 2015), including representational framing of ideology and identity, the political and economic power dynamics and incentives, as well as the symbolic capital or prestige that comes from associating oneself or one's organization with internationalization markers.

In Uzbekistan, international identities are highly privileged in higher education. Attracting international partnerships, students, and faculty is a quality indicator for Uzbek universities; thus, those connections are advertised frequently. International faculty are often attracted through programs such as Fulbright Fellowships, which are of relatively little cost to the university. These temporary international faculty members are often featured heavily in the public-facing advertising of their host institutions. This serves as an example of how international identities (especially Western identities) are utilized for signaling of internationalization and quality (Zheng, et al. (2020). Thus, the universities studied consistently advertised numbers and statistics of international faculty. The ability to attract international students serves the dual purpose of quality signaling and financial benefit (Hwami, 2024). Thus, the common theme of universities prominently advertising admissions information for foreign students serves these dual aims.

The Uzbekistan government is attempting to modernize the national education system, with strategies aimed at increasing global rankings and international research quality specifically targeted since 2022 (Krouglov, 2022; World Bank, 2023). This comes partly as a response to impactful research, which revealed that 98 percent of research published by Uzbek academics was published in discredited journals (Eshchanov, et al., 2021). Although political initiatives are prioritizing reform of research quality, these measures are slow to be adopted in practice, possibly explaining why none of the universities sampled publicly advertised information according to the full THE indicators for research quality.

Internationalization markers carry a significant amount of symbolic capital in Uzbekistan, with the previous association with quality being explored. This symbolic capital exists for any international endeavor; however, that linked with Western-backed projects is often viewed more favorably. In this way, it is similar to the Kazakh context explored by Kuzhabekova (2024). This serves to explain why international, particularly Western partnerships, were prominently advertised on the homepage of all of the surveyed university websites, even though international partnership is not an indicator assessed by the THE. Advertising these partnerships serves as a signal of symbolic capital amongst local audiences.

Implications

This study extends the CDA literature by utilizing Fairclough's (2010) textual-discursive framework to show how ranking regimes function as discursive infrastructures. Rankings do not merely measure institutions—they shape what institutions (work to be able to) say about themselves.

For university administrators, the findings underscore the importance of transparent, multilingual reporting that aligns with all five Times Higher Education (THE) pillars rather than emphasizing only those most easily marketable, such as Industry and International Outlook. Comprehensive transparency fosters institutional credibility and mitigates reputational dependence on selective ranking narratives (Loukkola et al., 2020; Xu, 2025).

A proposed minimum transparency bundle would include three key elements. First, bilingual annual reports that communicate institutional performance data and strategic outcomes in both national and international languages, ensuring equitable access to information for domestic and global audiences (EUA, 2020). Second, open-access data dashboards provide real-time, verifiable statistics across research, teaching, and community engagement metrics, thereby strengthening evidence-based governance (EdTech Magazine, 2022). Third, validated translations of key documents and reports to prevent discrepancies between local and English-language versions, a critical measure for maintaining trust in multilingual and international environments (Princeton University, 2022). Implementing such a transparency framework supports responsible internationalization by promoting accountability, comparability, and stakeholder engagement beyond performative compliance with ranking systems.

Limitations & Future Research Directions

This study is limited to website data collected in Fall 2025. To limit the scope, content updates, social-media messaging, and internal communications were excluded. Future research could integrate interviews with web administrators, analyze multilingual press releases, or compare THE- versus QS-oriented discourse. The digital self-representations of Uzbek universities reveal how the global ranking apparatus extends beyond evaluation to discourse formation. By selectively aligning with THE indicators, universities participate in a semiotic economy where visibility equals value. The CDA perspective shows that while these institutions aspire to internationalization, their communicative practices often enact Westernization—reproducing the very hierarchies they seek to transcend. Future research should also explore more deeply the motivations and strategies of individual universities in Uzbekistan for pursuing global rankings, as well as any relevant government initiatives promoting such aims.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to examine how Uzbek universities negotiate global ranking criteria in discourses of internationalization by conducting a CDA of the

public-facing information on university websites. The website information was compared to THE global university ranking metrics, revealing that ranked universities position their information in ways that are more accessible to international audiences and more in line with the information sought by global ranking bodies. This contributes to the ongoing academic discourse on higher education internationalization and the impact of global ranking systems on international higher education institutions by highlighting the perspectives of universities in Uzbekistan, a post-Soviet state that is often overlooked in these discourses.

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