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IMPACT WITHOUT MASS: DIVERGENT RESEARCH SIGNALS FOR UZBEK UNIVERSITIES IN THE THE AND QS WORLD UNIVERSITY RANKINGS 2027

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Abstract: The article examines how Uzbek universities perform in the two most widely used global rankings released for 2027, Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings and QS World University Rankings, and explains why the two rankings send contradictory signals about the same institutions' research. The study uses the full THE 2027 table (3,146 institutions, of which 2,297 ranked and 849 reporters) and the full QS 2027 table (1,504 institutions). Pillar and indicator medians for Uzbekistan are compared with world and Kazakhstan benchmarks. A name-matched panel of 1,116 institutions appearing in both rankings is used to build a divergence index: the percentile on THE Research quality minus the percentile on QS Citations per faculty. Ranked Uzbek universities have a median THE Research quality score of 66.5, above the world median of 53.3, but a Research environment score of 11.7 and a QS Citations per faculty score of 1.9. The median divergence for Uzbekistan is 53.5 percentile points, the second highest of 57 countries, against -1.0 for the matched panel as a whole. The result holds under three alternative specifications. Forty-five of the 53 Uzbek submissions to THE received reporter status. High citation impact per paper is not matched by publication volume or research income. National performance indicators should shift from citation impact towards publication intensity per academic, research income and the THE eligibility threshold. To the author's knowledge, this is the first institution-level comparison of Uzbek universities across both 2027 global rankings and the first to quantify the gap between per-paper impact and per-staff research volume as a diagnostic indicator for ranking policy.

Keywords: university rankings, research quality, citations per faculty, ranking divergence, Uzbekistan

Annotatsiya: Maqolada Times Higher Education (THE) va QS jahon universitetlari reytinglarining 2027-yilgi to‘liq ma’lumotlari asosida O‘zbekiston oliy ta’lim tashkilotlarining natijalari tahlil qilingan. THE reytingidagi 3 146 ta va QS reytingidagi 1 504 ta tashkilot ma’lumotlari jahon va Qozog‘iston ko‘rsatkichlari bilan solishtirilgan. Ikkala reytingda ham qatnashgan 1 116 ta tashkilot bo‘yicha divergensiya indeksi hisoblangan: THE “Research quality” persentili va QS “Citations per faculty” persentili o‘rtasidagi farq. Natijalarga ko‘ra, O‘zbekiston universitetlarining “Research quality” bo‘yicha medianasi 66,5 ballni tashkil etib,

jahon medianasidan (53,3) yuqori, biroq “Research environment” bo‘yicha 11,7 va QS “Citations per faculty” bo‘yicha 1,9 ballga teng. O‘zbekiston bo‘yicha divergensiya medianasi 53,5 persentil punktni tashkil etib, 57 ta davlat orasida ikkinchi eng yuqori ko‘rsatkichdir. THE reytingiga ma’lumot taqdim etgan 53 ta tashkilotdan 45 tasi “reporter” maqomini olgan. Maqola bitta maqolaga to‘g‘ri keladigan iqtibos ta’siri yuqori bo‘lsa-da, nashrlar hajmi va ilmiy daromad past ekanini ko‘rsatadi va milliy KPI tizimini professor-o‘qituvchiga to‘g‘ri keladigan nashrlar soni hamda THE kirish mezoni tomon yo‘naltirishni taklif etadi.

Kalit so‘zlar: universitet reytinglari, ilmiy tadqiqotlar sifati, professor-o‘qituvchiga to‘g‘ri keladigan iqtiboslar, reytinglar divergensiyasi, O‘zbekiston

Аннотатция: В статье на основе полных данных рейтингов Times Higher Education (THE) и QS World University Rankings 2027 года анализируются результаты высших образовательных учреждений Узбекистана. Данные по 3 146 организациям THE и 1 504 организациям QS сопоставлены с мировыми показателями и показателями Казахстана. Для 1 116 организаций, представленных в обоих рейтингах, рассчитан индекс расхождения - разница между процентилем по показателю THE «Research quality» и процентилем по показателю QS «Citations per faculty». Медиана Узбекистана по «Research quality» составляет 66,5 балла и превышает мировую медиану (53,3), однако по «Research environment» она равна 11,7, а по QS «Citations per faculty» - 1,9 балла. Медианное расхождение для Узбекистана составляет 53,5 процентильных пункта - второй по величине показатель среди 57 стран. Из 53 вузов, представивших данные в THE, 45 получили статус «reporter». Показано, что высокое цитирование в расчёте на одну публикацию не подкреплено объёмом публикаций и научными доходами; предлагается переориентировать национальные KPI на число публикаций на одного преподавателя и порог включения в рейтинг THE.

Ключевые слова: университетские рейтинги, качество исследований, цитирование на одного преподавателя, расхождение рейтингов, Узбекистан

Introduction

Global university rankings have become part of how Uzbekistan governs its higher education system. The Concept for the Development of the Higher Education System until 2030, approved by Presidential Decree PF-5847 of 8 October 2019, set the target of including at least ten higher education institutions in the top 1,000 of internationally recognised rankings, namely QS, THE and ARWU [1]. Since then, ranking positions have become a reference point in the management of higher education institutions. In this sense Uzbekistan follows a wider pattern in which rankings move from information tools to instruments of steering [2, 3] and then reshape the behaviour of those they measure [4].

The 2027 editions of the two main global rankings were released in 2026: QS in June and THE on 30 September. Times Higher Education published a table of 3,146 institutions from 131 countries and territories, of which 2,297 received a rank and 849 were listed as reporters; ranked institutions come from 118 countries and territories [5, 6]. QS published 1,504 institutions [7]. Uzbekistan submitted data for 53 institutions to THE, the largest number in Central Asia, and has six institutions in QS. Against the PF-5847 target, however, only three Uzbek institutions are in the top 1,000 of either ranking: the Tashkent Institute of Irrigation and Agricultural Mechanization Engineers - National Research University (TIIAME; THE 551-600, QS 458), Tashkent State University of Economics (TSUE; THE 651-700) and the National University of Uzbekistan (NUUz; QS 801-850).

A closer look at the indicator scores reveals a puzzle. In THE, several Uzbek universities score between 70 and 80 on Research quality, a pillar based on citation impact, which places them around or above the 75th percentile of all ranked institutions on that pillar (between the 74th and 85th percentiles). In QS, the same universities score between 1 and 5 out of 100 on Citations per faculty, which places them among the weakest institutions in the table. Both indicators are built from the same Scopus data, and both are described as measures of research performance. A university policy-maker reading the two rankings receives opposite messages.

The contradiction matters beyond technical debate. Rankings are read by applicants, international partners, employers and ministries, and each of these audiences usually looks at the overall position and one or two headline indicators. If a high citation score is read as evidence of research strength, while the low research volume behind it remains unnoticed, policy can be built on the wrong diagnosis. Universities may be rewarded for citation outcomes that depend on a small number of papers, while the underlying constraints, such as the share of research-active staff, research funding and the time available for research, stay unaddressed. For a system that has set itself an explicit ranking target, the correct reading of indicator profiles is therefore a practical management question, not only an academic one.

This article explains that contradiction and draws its implications for policy. It asks three questions. RQ1: How do the pillar and indicator profiles of Uzbek universities in THE 2027 and QS 2027 compare with world and regional benchmarks? RQ2: How large is the divergence between per-paper research impact (THE) and per-staff research volume (QS) for Uzbek universities, and where does it sit in the global distribution? RQ3: What does the structure of Uzbek participation in THE, in particular the share of reporter institutions, add to the explanation?

The article contributes in three ways. It provides the first institution-level analysis of Uzbek universities across both 2027 global rankings. It proposes a simple divergence index that can be computed from public ranking data for any country. And it shows that the divergence is not random noise but a consistent national profile,

which points to specific changes in the national indicator system. The rest of the article reviews the literature, describes the data and method, presents the results and discusses their implications.

Literature Review

Research on global rankings has long stressed that composite tables combine indicators that measure different things, with weights that reflect the ranker's choices rather than an agreed model of university quality [2, 8, 9]. Moed's comparative analysis of five world rankings showed that institutions' positions depend heavily on the indicator mix and that citation-based indicators are especially sensitive to methodological choices such as normalisation and the treatment of outliers [8]. Huang opened the black box of the QS ranking and showed how strongly its results depend on reputation surveys [10]. Soh grouped such weaknesses into a set of recurring "sins", among them spurious precision and the assumption that strength on one indicator can compensate for weakness on another [11]. Lim showed how rankers build authority for their products despite these weaknesses [12].

A second stream compares rankings with each other. Aguillo and colleagues found substantial but far from perfect agreement among major rankings [13]. Shehatta and Mahmood reported strong but uneven correlations among the top 100 universities in six global rankings [14]. Selten and colleagues, using longitudinal data, found that ranking positions are strongly associated with institutional size and reputation, so that apparent agreement between rankings can hide different underlying constructs [15]. These studies mostly concentrate on the top of the distribution. Much less is known about how rankings disagree for institutions from emerging systems that sit in the long tail of the tables, which is where almost all Central Asian universities are found.

The bibliometric literature offers a third, more technical, lens. Citation impact indicators can be size-independent, such as mean field-weighted citation impact, or size-dependent, such as total citations or citations per staff [16]. The two families answer different questions and can rank the same institutions very differently [16]. Mean-based indicators are also unstable when the publication base is small: a handful of highly cited papers can lift an institution's average far above its typical output [8, 16]. The Leiden Manifesto therefore recommends that quantitative indicators support, rather than replace, expert judgement and that they be interpreted in context [17]. THE adds a further adjustment: half of its citation impact score is normalised by the citation impact of the country in which the university is located, which raises scores for institutions in countries with low average citation impact [5].

These strands can be combined into a simple analytical framework. Any research indicator in a ranking can be placed on two dimensions: whether it is normalised per paper or per staff member, and whether it reflects outcomes (citations) or inputs and processes (income, reputation, volume). Per-paper outcome indicators, such as THE citation impact, reward selectivity: a university that publishes a few well-cited papers

scores highly. Per-staff indicators, such as QS Citations per faculty or THE research productivity, reward intensity: they are high only when a large share of the academic workforce publishes regularly and is cited. In a mature research system the two usually move together, because high intensity and high impact reinforce each other. In an emerging system they can separate. The framework therefore predicts that the gap between per-paper and per-staff indicators will be largest where research activity is concentrated in a small part of the academic workforce, and that this gap is a sign of an early stage of research development rather than of research excellence.

A fourth stream concerns the effects of rankings on national policy. Rankings create incentives that institutions and governments respond to, sometimes in ways that improve the measure more than the underlying performance [4, 18]. Critics have questioned the validity of ranking indicators [19, 20] and warned against using rankings as targets of national policy [20, 21]. In Uzbekistan, ranking targets have been set at the level of presidential policy, yet the empirical literature on how Uzbek universities actually score in global rankings remains thin and mostly descriptive. No study has examined how the two main rankings diverge in their reading of Uzbek research. This article addresses that gap.

Methodology

The study is quantitative and uses secondary data. Two sources were used. The first is the complete THE World University Rankings 2027 table, published on 30 September 2026, containing 3,146 institutions with their rank band, overall score band, five pillar scores (Teaching, Research environment, Research quality, Industry and International outlook) and status (ranked or reporter) [5, 6]. The second is the complete QS World University Rankings 2027 table, containing 1,504 institutions with rank, previous rank and scores on nine indicators: Academic reputation, Employer reputation, Faculty/student ratio, Citations per faculty, International faculty ratio, International student ratio, International research network, Employment outcomes and Sustainability [7].

The key indicators are defined as follows. In THE 2027, Research quality (30% of the total) combines citation impact (15%), research strength (5%), research excellence (5%) and research influence (5%). Citation impact is the mean field-weighted citation impact of publications from 2021-2025, with citations counted to 2026; it is a 50:50 blend of a country-adjusted and a non-adjusted measure [5]. Research environment (29%) combines research reputation (18%), research income per academic (5.5%) and research productivity, measured as publications per scholar (5.5%) [5]. In QS 2027, Citations per faculty (20%) divides an institution’s citation count, excluding self-citations and normalised across five broad faculty areas, by the number of academic staff [7]. Thus THE Research quality is mainly a per-paper measure, whereas QS Citations per faculty is a per-staff measure that depends on both the number of papers and their impact.

The analysis proceeded in four steps:

1. Descriptive comparison. For ranked institutions, median pillar scores were computed for Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and the world. Kazakhstan was chosen as the regional benchmark because it is the only other Central Asian country with ranked institutions in THE 2027 and has the largest Central Asian presence in QS 2027.
2. Participation structure. The share of reporter institutions among all submissions to THE was computed for each country with at least 20 submissions.
3. Matched panel. Institutions appearing in both tables were matched within each country. Names were normalised by removing accents, punctuation and acronyms in brackets, and by translating common words such as Universidad or Universität into English. A pair was accepted only when the remaining distinctive words of the two names were identical; where several candidates qualified, the most similar name was kept, and one-to-many matches were dropped. All Uzbek and Kazakh pairs were checked manually, and three institutions whose names differ between the two tables (TIIAME, Buketov Karaganda University and Seifullin Kazakh Agrotechnical University) were matched by hand. The final panel contains 1,116 institutions with both a THE Research quality score and a QS Citations per faculty score.
4. Divergence index. For each matched institution, the divergence index D was computed as the percentile rank on THE Research quality minus the percentile rank on QS Citations per faculty, both within the matched panel (formula 1). D ranges from -100 to +100. A positive value means that the institution looks stronger on per-paper impact than on per-staff volume. Country medians were computed for the 57 countries with at least five matched institutions. The difference between Uzbek institutions and the rest of the panel was tested with a one-sided Mann-Whitney U test.

$$D_i = P_i^{\mathrm{RQ}} - P_i^{\mathrm{CPF}} \qquad (1)$$

where D is the divergence index of institution i, P(RQ) is its percentile rank on THE Research quality and P(CPF) is its percentile rank on QS Citations per faculty, both calculated within the matched panel.

Percentile ranks were used instead of raw scores because the two rankings standardise their indicators differently, which makes raw scores not directly comparable. The Spearman rank correlation between the two indicators in the matched panel was also computed as a check on whether they measure related constructs.

Three robustness checks were carried out. First, the difference of standardised raw scores (z-scores) was used instead of the difference of percentiles. Second, percentiles were computed against the full tables (all ranked THE institutions and all QS institutions) rather than within the matched panel. Third, QS Citations per faculty was

replaced by THE Research environment, which combines research reputation, research income and research productivity; this tests whether the pattern holds within a single ranking. Finally, each matched institution was assigned to one of four types, using the panel median (50th percentile) on each indicator as the cut-off: High-High (both indicators at or above the median), Impact-led (Research quality at or above the median, Citations per faculty below), Volume-led (the reverse) and Low-Low (both below).

Results

Profiles in the two rankings

Table 1 lists Uzbek institutions in both rankings. Eight Uzbek universities are ranked in THE 2027 and six in QS 2027; all six QS institutions are also ranked in THE. Two Uzbek universities are in the THE top 1,000 and two in the QS top 1,000, with TIIAME the only one in both. In QS, TIIAME improved from 469 to 458, Samarkand State University (SamSU) and Tashkent State Transport University (TSTrU) kept their bands, while NUUz, Tashkent State Technical University (TSTU) and TSUE moved to lower bands.

Table 1. Uzbek universities in THE WUR 2027 and QS WUR 2027

Institution	THE rank	THE RQ	THE RE	QS rank 2027 (2026)	QS CPF
TIIAME	551-600	70.9	17.9	458 (469)	4.4
Tashkent State University of Economics	651-700	79.8	13.6	1201-1400 (1001-1200)	1.6
Tashkent State Technical University	1001-1200	75.6	9.9	1001-1200 (901-950)	2.4
Tashkent State Transport University	1001-1200	75.1	10.6	1201-1400 (1201-1400)	1.3
National University of Uzbekistan	1201-1400	41.2	12.9	801-850 (721-730)	2.2
Samarkand State University	1201-1400	57.2	11.9	1001-1200 (1001-1200)	1.3
Tashkent University of Information Technologies	1201-1400	62.1	11.5	-	-
Tashkent State Medical University	2001+	8.5	10.6	-	-

Source: compiled by the author from THE World University Rankings 2027 [5] and QS World University Rankings 2027 [7]. RQ - Research quality; RE - Research environment; CPF - Citations per faculty; "-" - not listed in QS 2027.

The pillar profile is shown in Fig. 1(a). The median Uzbek ranked institution is close to the world median on Teaching (24.8 against 25.6) and International outlook (46.1 against 44.9). It is clearly above the world on Research quality (66.5 against 53.3) and clearly below on Research environment (11.7 against 19.2) and Industry (23.1 against 40.9). Kazakhstan's profile is flatter: its Research quality median is only 22.4, while its International outlook median of 58.3 is the highest of the three groups.

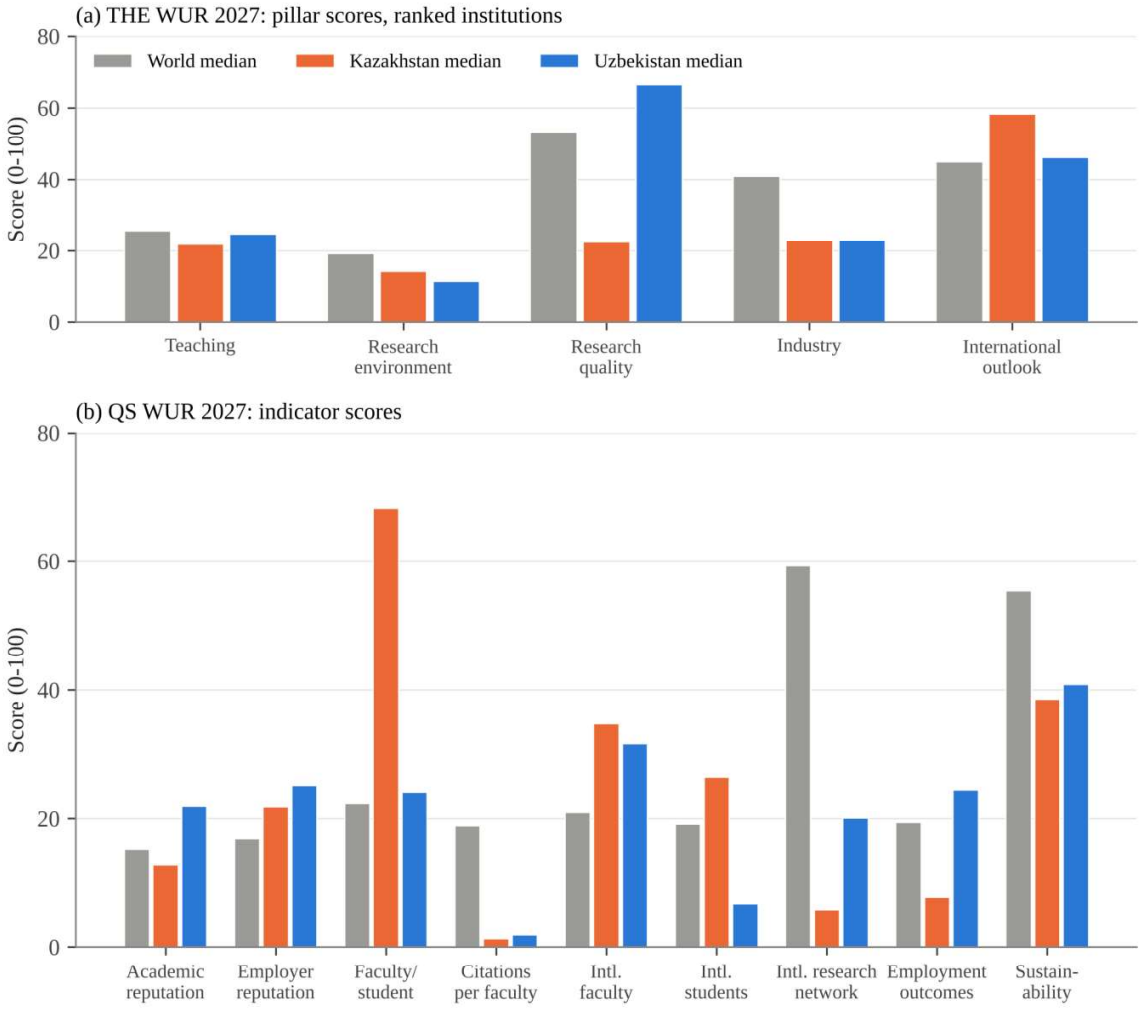


Fig. 1. Median pillar and indicator scores: Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and the world, THE WUR 2027 (a) and QS WUR 2027 (b)

Source: author's calculations based on THE WUR 2027 [5] and QS WUR 2027 [7]. THE medians are for ranked institutions only.

The QS profile in Fig. 1(b) tells a different story. Uzbek medians are above the world on Academic reputation (22.1 against 15.4), Employer reputation (25.2 against 17.0) and Employment outcomes (24.5 against 19.4). On Citations per faculty, however, the Uzbek median is 1.9, against a world median of 18.9. The International student ratio (6.8) and International research network (20.1) are also far below the world medians (19.2 and 59.4). Kazakhstan shows the same weakness on Citations per faculty (1.3) and on International research network (5.9), but a much higher Faculty/student ratio (68.3) and International student ratio (26.5).

Within THE, the gap between Research quality and Research environment is a useful summary of the imbalance. The median gap for Uzbek ranked institutions is

51.8 points, against 27.7 for all ranked institutions. Among the 68 countries with at least five ranked institutions, only Jordan (60.8), the United Arab Emirates (57.8) and Bangladesh (56.3) have a larger median gap.

Divergence between per-paper impact and per-staff volume

In the matched panel of 1,116 institutions, the two indicators are clearly related (Spearman $\rho = 0.70$, $p < 0.001$), which confirms that they share a common bibliometric basis. The divergence index has a median of -1.0, a 90th percentile of 29.8 and a 95th percentile of 41.1. Fig. 2 plots each institution's position on the two percentiles.

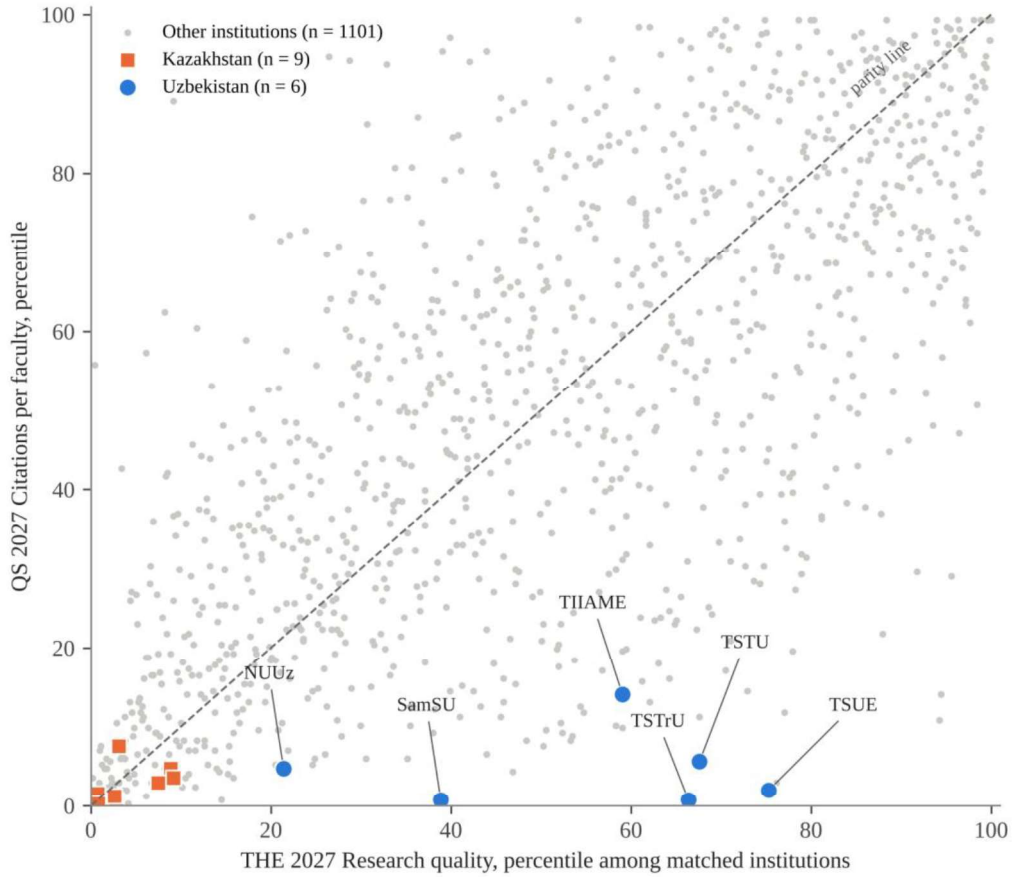


Fig. 2. THE Research quality and QS Citations per faculty, percentile ranks in the matched panel (n = 1,116)

Source: author's calculations based on THE WUR 2027 [5] and QS WUR 2027 [7].

Most Uzbek institutions lie far below the parity line. TSUE has a divergence of 73.3 points, TSTrU 65.6, TSTU 62.0, TIIAME 45.0, SamSU 38.1 and NUUz 16.6. Four of the six exceed the global 95th percentile; TSUE, TSTrU and TSTU are among the ten most divergent institutions in the entire panel. The difference from the rest of the panel is statistically significant (Mann-Whitney $U = 6{,}334.5$, one-sided $p < 0.001$).

Kazakh institutions, by contrast, cluster near the origin: both their per-paper impact and their per-staff volume are low, and their median divergence is 2.0.

Table 2 places Uzbekistan in the international distribution. With a median divergence of 53.5 points, Uzbekistan ranks second of 57 countries, after Jordan (55.9). The other countries at the top of the list are Bangladesh, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. The next countries, the United Kingdom and Germany, have medians of only about 12 points, so the leading group is clearly separated from the rest.

Table 2. Countries with the highest median divergence index (countries with at least five matched institutions)

No.	Country	Matched institutions	Median divergence, percentile points
1	Jordan	8	55.9
2	Uzbekistan	6	53.5
3	Bangladesh	11	44.7
4	Egypt	16	29.7
5	United Arab Emirates	7	28.3
6	Saudi Arabia	20	25.7
7	United Kingdom	87	12.5
8	Germany	34	12.4
22	Kazakhstan	9	2.0
-	All matched institutions	1,116	-1.0

Source: author's calculations based on THE WUR 2027 [5] and QS WUR 2027 [7]. Divergence = percentile on THE Research quality minus percentile on QS Citations per faculty within the matched panel.

Participation structure

The reporter data add a third element to the picture (Table 3). Of the 53 Uzbek institutions that submitted data to THE 2027, 45 (84.9%) were listed as reporters, meaning that they provided data but did not meet the eligibility criteria. The main criterion is research volume: at least 1,000 relevant publications over 2021-2025, with a minimum of 100 a year [5]. Among the 40 countries with at least 20 submissions, only Angola and the Philippines have a higher reporter share. The world average is 27.0%. Kazakhstan's share (76.2%) is also high, which suggests a regional pattern of strong willingness to participate combined with insufficient research volume.

Table 3. Participation of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in THE WUR 2027 and QS WUR 2027

Indicator	Uzbekistan	Kazakhstan	World
Institutions submitting to THE	53	42	3,146
of which ranked	8	10	2,297
of which reporters	45	32	849
Reporter share, %	84.9	76.2	27.0
Ranked in THE top 1,000	2	1	-
Listed in QS 2027	6	18	1,504
Ranked in QS top 1,000	2	8	-

Source: author's calculations based on THE WUR 2027 [5] and QS WUR 2027 [7].

Robustness and typology

The result does not depend on the way the divergence is measured. Table 4 reports the position of Uzbekistan under the main specification and the three alternatives. With z-scores, Uzbekistan ranks second of 57 countries. With percentiles computed against the full tables, it ranks first, with a median divergence of 63.6 points. When THE Research environment replaces QS Citations per faculty, Uzbekistan ranks second, after Bangladesh. The pattern is therefore visible not only between the two rankings but also inside THE itself. Across the panel, the divergence is negatively related to THE Research environment (Spearman $\rho = -0.11$, $p < 0.001$): institutions with weaker research environments tend to show larger gaps.

Table 4. Robustness of the divergence result: rank of Uzbekistan among countries with at least five matched institutions

Specification	Uzbekistan median	Rank of Uzbekistan (of 57)	Countries ranked above
Main: percentile difference within the matched panel	53.5	2	Jordan
Standardised score (z) difference	1.53	2	Jordan
Percentiles against the full THE and QS tables	63.6	1	-
THE Research quality minus THE Research environment (percentiles)	51.4	2	Bangladesh

Source: author's calculations based on THE WUR 2027 [5] and QS WUR 2027 [7].

The typology gives an institution-level view (Table 5). Of the 1,116 matched institutions, 421 are High-High, 420 Low-Low, 137 Impact-led and 138 Volume-led. Four of the six Uzbek institutions (TIIAME, TSUE, TSTU and TSTrU) are Impact-led, a type that covers only 12.3% of the panel. NUUz and SamSU are Low-Low. All nine Kazakh institutions are Low-Low. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan therefore share the same weakness in research volume per staff, but Uzbek universities differ from their neighbours in having a strong citation profile in THE. This means that the Uzbek

gap is not simply a matter of low overall research performance; it is a specific imbalance between impact and volume.

Table 5. Typology of matched institutions by THE Research quality and QS Citations per faculty

Type	Definition	All matched institutions	Uzbekistan	Kazakhstan
High-High	Both indicators at or above the panel median	421	-	-
Impact-led	Research quality at or above the median, Citations per faculty below	137	TIIAME, TSUE, TSTU, TSTrU	-
Volume-led	Citations per faculty at or above the median, Research quality below	138	-	-
Low-Low	Both indicators below the panel median	420	NUUz, SamSU	All 9

Source: author's calculations based on THE WUR 2027 [5] and QS WUR 2027 [7]. "-" - no institutions of this type.

The QS results for 2027 also show the cost of this imbalance over time. Among 1,406 QS institutions with a previous rank, 28.7% moved up, 23.9% kept their position or band and 47.4% moved down. For Uzbekistan the figures are one up, two unchanged and three down; for Kazakhstan, none up, six unchanged and twelve down. Because Citations per faculty carries 20% of the QS total and Uzbek scores on it are close to zero, Uzbek institutions have little room to compensate for small losses elsewhere. Their QS positions rest mainly on reputation and on the faculty and employment indicators.

Discussion and Conclusions

The results answer the three research questions. On RQ1, Uzbek universities show an unbalanced profile: high research quality and comparatively good reputation scores in some indicators, but a weak research environment, low industry income and very low citations per faculty. On RQ2, the divergence between per-paper impact and per-staff volume is not an anomaly of one or two institutions; it is a national pattern and the second highest among the 57 countries with at least five matched institutions. On RQ3, the very high reporter share shows that the volume constraint affects not only the ranked institutions but almost the whole system.

The construction of the indicators offers the most plausible explanation of the divergence. THE Research quality is mainly an average of citation impact per paper. When an institution publishes relatively few papers, a small number of highly cited ones, for example papers from large international collaborations, can raise the mean a long way [8, 16]. The country adjustment in THE then increases the score further for institutions in a country whose average citation impact is low [5]. QS Citations per faculty, by contrast, divides total citations by the number of academic staff. Uzbek

universities have large teaching staffs and relatively small publication volumes, so even a high citation rate per paper produces a low score per staff member. THE Research environment, which includes publications per scholar and research income per academic, is low for the same reason. On this reading, the two rankings do not contradict each other; they measure different dimensions of the same situation, which can be described as impact without mass.

This interpretation agrees with bibliometric work showing that size-independent and size-dependent indicators answer different questions [16] and with ranking studies that warn against reading any single pillar as a measure of overall research strength [8, 11, 15]. It also extends the comparative ranking literature, which has focused on the top of the distribution [13, 14], by showing that disagreement between rankings is largest and most informative for institutions in emerging systems.

Several policy implications follow. First, a high THE Research quality score should not be treated as evidence that Uzbek research is already competitive. Because it rests on a small base, it is fragile: a decline in a few highly cited papers would move it sharply, and it creates an incentive to chase citations rather than build research capacity [17, 18]. Second, national key performance indicators should give more weight to publication intensity per academic, research income per academic and the share of staff who are research-active. These are the indicators that drive both THE Research environment and QS Citations per faculty. Third, the THE eligibility threshold of 1,000 publications over five years, with a minimum of 100 a year, is a concrete, measurable target for the 45 reporter institutions. Research consortia among regional universities and joint affiliations with national research institutes may help institutions cross it. Fourth, the divergence index itself can be used by the Ministry and by universities as an early-warning indicator. A large positive value signals that ranking positions depend on a narrow base and may not be sustainable.

Table 6 summarises these recommendations by actor and links each of them to the ranking indicators it is expected to affect.

The study has limitations. The analysis is descriptive and cross-sectional: it establishes a consistent pattern, but it cannot prove which mechanism produces it, and the explanation offered above should be tested with publication-level data. It uses a single year of data, so it cannot show whether the divergence is narrowing over time. The matching of institutions across rankings relies on names and may omit some institutions, although all Uzbek and Kazakh matches were checked manually. Pillar scores are published, but the sub-indicator scores within pillars are not, so the contribution of country adjustment and of individual highly cited papers cannot be separated with public data. The number of Uzbek institutions in the matched panel is small (six), and the results should be read as a national profile rather than as precise estimates. Future research could combine ranking data with institution-level Scopus

data to identify which publications drive citation impact, and repeat the analysis for the 2028 editions to track change.

Table 6. Policy recommendations and the ranking indicators they target

Actor	Recommendation	Indicators affected
Ministry responsible for higher education	Replace citation-impact targets in institutional KPIs with publications per academic, research income per academic and share of research-active staff	THE Research environment; QS Citations per faculty
Ministry and the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education	Monitor the divergence index annually for each institution as an early-warning indicator of narrow-base ranking positions	All research indicators
Reporter institutions (45)	Set a dated plan to reach 1,000 Scopus publications over five years, with a minimum of 100 a year; use consortia and joint affiliations with research institutes	THE eligibility; THE Research environment
Ranked universities	Increase the share of staff who publish regularly; protect research time; build long-term international co-authorship	QS Citations per faculty; QS International research network; THE Research environment
All universities	Improve data quality in ranking submissions, especially staff counts and research income	QS Faculty/student; QS Citations per faculty; THE Research environment

Source: compiled by the author based on the results of the study.

In conclusion, the THE and QS 2027 rankings agree on one essential point about Uzbek universities, although they appear to disagree. The research that Uzbek universities publish is often well cited, but there is too little of it relative to the size of the academic workforce, and it is not yet supported by sufficient research income and research productivity. Closing this gap, rather than chasing a higher score on any single indicator, is the most reliable route to the PF-5847 target of ten institutions in the global top 1,000.

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