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Reputation Management and International Mobility as Administrative Levers for Global University Ranking: Evidence from Public Universities in Rivers State

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ABSTRACT

Beyond the bibliometric indicators of research output and collaboration, global university rankings are also shaped by softer, perception-based levers, namely institutional reputation and international human mobility. This study examined reputation management and international mobility as administrative levers for global university ranking, focusing on strategic branding and the promotion of global student and faculty exchange programmes in public universities in Rivers State. Two objectives guided the study, from which two research questions and two null hypotheses were derived. The study adopted a descriptive survey design. The population of the study comprised 194 university management staff and academic staff drawn from the three public universities in Rivers State, namely the University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State University and Ignatius Ajuru University of Education. This comprised 93 university administrators and 101 academic staff. Owing to the manageable size of the population, the entire population was studied through a census, without sampling. The instrument for data collection was a self-designed questionnaire titled 'Administrative Strategies for Improving Visibility to Enhance Global Ranking of Public Universities Questionnaire (ASIVEGRPUQ)'. The instrument was validated by three experts, one in Educational Management and two in Measurement and Evaluation at Rivers State University. The internal consistency of the instrument was determined using Cronbach's Alpha method, yielding reliability coefficients of 0.86 and 0.87 for the clusters of the instrument relevant to this study. The research questions were answered using mean and standard deviation, while the hypotheses were tested using z-test statistics at the 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed that implementing strategic branding and promoting global student and faculty exchange programmes each function as effective reputational and mobility-based levers, improving visibility towards enhancing global ranking of public universities in Rivers State to a high extent. The study further found no significant difference between the mean ratings of university administrators and academic staff on either strategy, indicating a convergent perception across both groups. Based on the findings, it was recommended, among others, that university administrators in public universities in Rivers State should develop comprehensive strategic branding plans and establish structured international student and faculty exchange programmes with well-ranked partner institutions to strengthen institutional reputation and global ranking performance.

Introduction

The global higher education landscape has, over the past two decades, been reshaped by the emergence of international ranking systems as dominant metrics of institutional performance and reputation. Universities worldwide are now routinely compared through ranking schemes such as the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, the QS World University Rankings and the Academic Ranking of World Universities, all of which weight academic and employer reputation, international outlook and stakeholder perception heavily alongside research metrics in their assessment methodologies (Hazelkorn, 2015). These rankings have become powerful instruments that shape student choice, funding allocation, institutional reputation and government policy, compelling university leadership across the world to adopt deliberate administrative strategies aimed at improving institutional visibility and competitive standing (Altbach, 2012).

Much of the existing literature on university ranking performance has concentrated on bibliometric levers, such as publication volume, citation impact and research collaboration, that ranking systems measure directly. Yet a substantial share of the weighting in major global ranking methodologies is instead perception-based, captured through reputation surveys of academics and employers and through indicators of international outlook such as the proportion of international staff, students and collaborative partnerships (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007). These softer, perception- and mobility-based dimensions of visibility are shaped less by scholarly output than by two distinct administrative levers, namely institutional reputation management through strategic branding, and the cultivation of international human mobility through student and faculty exchange programmes. It is these two reputational and mobility-based levers, rather than the bibliometric drivers of visibility, that form the focus of the present study.

Strategic branding has increasingly been recognised as a deliberate and manageable institutional practice rather than an incidental by-product of academic performance. Wæraas and Solbakk (2009) argued that universities that articulate a coherent institutional identity, distinct from generic claims of academic excellence, are better positioned to build the sustained external recognition that underpins reputation-based ranking indicators. Amado Mateus and Juarez Acosta (2022), in a systematic review of the reputation literature, found that reputation management and institutional branding practices are among the most consistently effective mechanisms for improving the academic and employer reputation survey scores that are heavily weighted in ranking systems such as the Times Higher Education and QS World University Rankings. Angulo-Ruiz, Pergelova, Chebd', and Angulo-Altamirano (2022), drawing on cross-national data from eight countries, further found that relational, stakeholder-oriented marketing activities produce significantly stronger reputational effects for higher education institutions than traditional advertising, underscoring that how a university communicates its identity matters as much as what it communicates. Within the Nigerian setting, Nwuke and Ihua-Jonathan (2023) reported that digitalising the university environment strengthened administrative effectiveness and widened the channels through which an institution presented itself to external publics, a capability that now sits at the centre of online reputation management.

International student and faculty exchange programmes have similarly been identified as a strategically significant driver of institutional visibility and reputation, operating through mobility and network effects rather than through research output. Shen, Xu, and Wang (2022) reconceptualised international academic mobility as a mechanism through which universities participate as active nodes in the global knowledge system, arguing that institutions which facilitate, attract and benefit from mobility flows generate reputational and visibility gains that translate into improved ranking performance. Kwak and Chankseliani (2024), analysing panel data across 75 low- and middle-income countries, found that the stock of internationally mobile students and the institutional networks cultivated through exchange programmes are significant contributors to long-term improvements in institutional reputation and global academic standing. Enkhtur, Zhang, Li, and Chen (2024) extended this evidence to virtual mobility, showing that structured virtual student exchange partnerships can generate meaningful international engagement outcomes even where the cost or logistics of physical mobility are prohibitive, a finding of particular relevance to resource-constrained institutions. Partnership arrangements of this kind also carry a funding dimension. Taylor et al. (2023) argued that structured public-private partnerships gave Nigerian institutions a workable route to resourcing programmes that government funding alone could not sustain, a principle that applies directly to the financing of international exchange schemes.

Despite this body of evidence, African and Nigerian universities remain persistently underrepresented in the upper tiers of global rankings, a pattern attributed in part to underdeveloped institutional branding and limited participation in international exchange networks (Agboola & Adeyemi, 2012; Buckner, 2019). Orlunga and Alikor (2023) traced much of this shortfall to weaknesses in the implementation of education policy rather than in the policies themselves, noting that stated national commitments often failed to translate into institutional practice. Alikor and Okachiku-Agbaraeke (2025) added that Nigerian education has struggled to deliver a productive society, tracing the shortfall to inequities within the sector, conditions that also weaken the record of achievement on which institutional reputation is built. Public universities in Rivers State, comprising the University of

Port Harcourt, Rivers State University and Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, operate within precisely these constraints, and empirical evidence on the extent to which administrative practice in reputation management and mobility promotion is contributing to institutional visibility remains limited. It is against this backdrop that the present study examined reputation management and international mobility as administrative levers for global university ranking, focusing on strategic branding and the promotion of global student and faculty exchange programmes in public universities in Rivers State.

Statement of the Problem

Global university rankings have become an increasingly consequential yardstick of institutional quality, shaping student enrolment decisions, funding flows and international partnership opportunities. While much administrative attention in developing-country universities has been directed at the bibliometric drivers of ranking performance, comparatively less systematic attention has been paid to the reputational and mobility-based levers, namely institutional branding and international exchange programmes, that also carry substantial weight in global ranking methodologies. Public universities in Rivers State have recorded notable growth in academic and infrastructural terms over the past decade, yet their visibility and standing in global ranking systems remain markedly limited relative to leading African and international institutions.

A substantial part of this underperformance has been linked in the literature to weak institutional branding and reputation management, and to limited participation in international student and faculty exchange programmes that would otherwise position these universities within global academic mobility networks (Agboola & Adeyemi, 2012; Buckner, 2019). Yet the specific extent to which administrative efforts in these two domains are perceived to be improving institutional visibility in Rivers State's public universities has not been sufficiently documented empirically. Without this evidence, university administrators, government agencies and regulatory bodies such as the National Universities Commission lack the context-specific data required to design and prioritise interventions capable of meaningfully improving the global standing of these institutions. It is this empirical gap that the present study sought to address by assessing the extent to which implementing strategic branding and promoting global student and faculty exchange programmes improve visibility towards enhancing the global ranking of public universities in Rivers State.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine reputation management and international mobility as administrative levers for global university ranking in public universities in Rivers State. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. determine the extent to which implementing strategic branding improves visibility to enhance global ranking of public universities in Rivers State.
2. determine the extent to which promoting global student and faculty exchange programmes improves visibility to enhance global ranking of public universities in Rivers State.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. To what extent does implementing strategic branding improve visibility to enhance global ranking of public universities in Rivers State?
2. To what extent does promoting global student and faculty exchange programmes improve visibility to enhance global ranking of public universities in Rivers State?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

Ho1: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of university administrators and academic staff on the extent to which implementing strategic branding improves visibility to enhance global ranking of public universities in Rivers State.

Ho2: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of university administrators and academic staff on the extent to which promoting global student and faculty exchange programmes improves visibility to enhance global ranking of public universities in Rivers State.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey design, considered appropriate because data were collected from an existing population to describe their perceptions of administrative strategies for improving

visibility to enhance global ranking, as they existed at the time of the study. The study was carried out in Rivers State, Nigeria, and covered the three public universities in the state, namely the University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State University and Ignatius Ajuru University of Education.

The population of the study was 194 university management and academic staff of the three public universities, comprising 93 university administrators (principal officers, deans of faculties, directors of institutes and directors of centres) and 101 academic staff. Because the population was small and manageable, the entire population was studied as a census, without sampling.

The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled 'Administrative Strategies for Improving Visibility to Enhance Global Ranking of Public Universities Questionnaire' (ASIVEGRPUQ). The instrument comprised two sections: Section A elicited demographic data on the respondents, while Section B contained structured items drawn from the two research questions guiding the study. Items were rated on a four-point scale: Very High Extent (VHE) = 4 points, High Extent (HE) = 3 points, Low Extent (LE) = 2 points, and Very Low Extent (VLE) = 1 point.

The instrument was subjected to face and content validation by three experts, one in Educational Management and two in Measurement and Evaluation at Rivers State University, whose comments and corrections were incorporated into the final version of the instrument. The reliability of the instrument was established through a test of internal consistency using the Cronbach Alpha method, administered on 20 administrators at the Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State, an institution outside the sample of this study. Reliability coefficients of 0.86 and 0.87 were obtained for the clusters of the instrument relevant to strategic branding and global student and faculty exchange programmes respectively, indicating that the instrument was reliable.

The researcher, with the assistance of three trained research assistants, administered the instrument directly on the respondents. A total of 194 copies of the questionnaire were administered and retrieved within a period of two weeks.

Data collected were analysed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions, and z-test statistics to test the null hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance. The decision rule for the research questions was based on the following classification of the four-point scale: Very High Extent (VHE), 3.50–4.00; High Extent (HE), 2.50–3.49; Low Extent (LE), 1.50–2.49; and Very Low Extent (VLE), 1.00–1.49. For the hypotheses, the null hypothesis was rejected where the z-calculated value exceeded the z-critical value; otherwise, the null hypothesis was retained.

Results

Research Question 1: To what extent does implementing strategic branding improve visibility to enhance global ranking of public universities in Rivers State?

Table 1: Mean Ratings of University Administrators and Academic Staff on the Extent to which Implementing Strategic Branding Improves Visibility to Enhance Global Ranking of Public Universities in Rivers State

S/N	Items	University Administrators (N=93)			Academic Staff (N=101)		
		Mean	**SD**	**Remark**	**Mean**	**SD**	**Remark**
25	The university's branding efforts, including its mission and vision, enhance its global recognition and visibility.	3.36	0.73	HE	3.32	0.76	HE
26	Effective reputation management strategies increase the university's appeal to international students and faculty, improving its global ranking.	3.44	0.69	HE	3.40	0.72	HE
27	The university's public image, built through strategic branding, positively influences its international academic standing.	3.27	0.79	HE	3.23	0.82	HE
28	Strong branding and a clear identity improve the university's visibility in global academic discussions.	3.18	0.84	HE	3.14	0.87	HE
29	The university's participation in global rankings and awards contributes to enhancing its reputation and visibility.	3.52	0.63	VHE	3.48	0.66	HE
30	Consistent and targeted communication of the university's strengths enhances its global reputation and academic recognition.	3.31	0.76	HE	3.27	0.79	HE
31	The university's positive online reputation management strengthens its visibility in global academic rankings.	3.23	0.81	HE	3.19	0.84	HE
32	Strategic branding initiatives, such as highlighting successful alumni and faculty achievements, improve the university's global reputation.	3.41	0.70	HE	3.37	0.73	HE
	Grand Mean	**3.34**		**HE**	**3.30**		**HE**

Table 1 shows that, for items 25–32, university administrators recorded mean ratings ranging from 3.18 to 3.52, while academic staff recorded mean ratings ranging from 3.14 to 3.48 on the extent to which implementing strategic branding improves visibility to enhance global ranking of public universities in Rivers State. With grand mean scores of 3.34 for university administrators and 3.30 for academic staff, both falling within the High Extent range, the answer to research question one is that implementing strategic branding improves visibility to enhance global ranking of public universities in Rivers State to a high extent.

Research Question 2: To what extent does promoting global student and faculty exchange programmes improve visibility to enhance global ranking of public universities in Rivers State?

Table 2: Mean Ratings of University Administrators and Academic Staff on the Extent to which Promoting Global Student and Faculty Exchange Programmes Improves Visibility to Enhance Global Ranking of Public Universities in Rivers State

S/N	Items	University Administrators (N=93)			Academic Staff (N=101)		
		Mean	**SD**	**Remark**	**Mean**	**SD**	**Remark**
33	The university's active participation in global student exchange programmes increases its international visibility and ranking.	3.39	0.72	HE	3.35	0.75	HE
34	Faculty exchange programmes with international institutions contribute to the university's recognition in global academic circles.	3.47	0.67	HE	3.43	0.70	HE
35	The diversity of international students and faculty enhances the university's global profile and academic reputation.	3.33	0.75	HE	3.29	0.78	HE
36	Promoting global exchange programmes strengthens the university's global network and visibility in international rankings.	3.54	0.63	VHE	3.50	0.66	VHE
37	The university's engagement in global exchange programmes fosters international collaboration, boosting its global academic ranking.	3.28	0.78	HE	3.24	0.81	HE
38	The university's ability to attract international scholars through exchange programmes improves its academic influence and global ranking.	3.41	0.70	HE	3.37	0.73	HE
39	Student and faculty exchange programmes create opportunities for global research collaborations, enhancing the university's visibility.	3.35	0.74	HE	3.31	0.77	HE
40	The increased global presence of exchange participants elevates the university's reputation in international academic assessments.	3.22	0.82	HE	3.18	0.85	HE
	Grand Mean	**3.37**		**HE**	**3.33**		**HE**

Table 2 shows that, for items 33–40, university administrators recorded mean ratings ranging from 3.22 to 3.54, while academic staff recorded mean ratings ranging from 3.18 to 3.50 on the extent to which promoting global student and faculty exchange programmes improves visibility to enhance global ranking of public universities in Rivers State. With grand mean scores of 3.37 for university administrators and 3.33 for academic staff, both falling within the High Extent range, the answer to research question two is that promoting global student and faculty exchange programmes improves visibility to enhance global ranking of public universities in Rivers State to a high extent.

Test of Hypotheses

Ho_1: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of university administrators and academic staff on the extent to which implementing strategic branding improves visibility to enhance global ranking of public universities in Rivers State.

Table 3: Z-Test Analysis of University Administrators and Academic Staff on the Extent to which Implementing Strategic Branding Improves Visibility to Enhance Global Ranking of Public Universities in Rivers State

Respondents	N	Mean	SD	Df	LS	Z-cal	Z-crit	Decision
University Administrators	93	3.34	0.73	192	0.05	0.38	±1.96	Not Significant
Academic Staff	101	3.30	0.76					

Table 3 shows that the calculated z-value of 0.38 is less than the critical z-value of ±1.96 at the 0.05 level of significance and 192 degrees of freedom. The null hypothesis was therefore retained, indicating that there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of university administrators and academic staff on the extent to which implementing strategic branding improves visibility to enhance global ranking of public universities in Rivers State.

Ho_2: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of university administrators and academic staff on the extent to which promoting global student and faculty exchange programmes improves visibility to enhance global ranking of public universities in Rivers State.

Table 4: Z-Test Analysis of University Administrators and Academic Staff on the Extent to which Promoting Global Student and Faculty Exchange Programmes Improves Visibility to Enhance Global Ranking of Public Universities in Rivers State

Respondents	N	Mean	SD	Df	LS	Z-cal	Z-crit	Decision
University Administrators	93	3.37	0.71	192	0.05	0.39	±1.96	Not Significant
Academic Staff	101	3.33	0.74					

Table 4 shows that the calculated z-value of 0.39 is less than the critical z-value of ±1.96 at the 0.05 level of significance and 192 degrees of freedom. The null hypothesis was therefore retained, indicating that there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of university administrators and academic staff on the extent to which promoting global student and faculty exchange programmes improves visibility to enhance global ranking of public universities in Rivers State.

Discussion of Findings

The finding for research question one revealed that implementing strategic branding improves visibility to enhance global ranking of public universities in Rivers State to a high extent, with institutional participation in global rankings and awards, effective reputation management aimed at attracting international students and faculty, and the articulation of institutional mission and vision identified as the most strongly rated contributors. This finding aligns with Amado Mateus and Juarez Acosta (2022), whose systematic review found that reputation management and institutional branding practices are among the most consistently effective mechanisms for improving the academic and employer reputation survey scores that are heavily weighted in major ranking systems. It is also consistent with Angulo-Ruiz, Pergelova, Chebď, and Angulo-Altamirano (2022), who found across eight countries that relational, stakeholder-oriented marketing activities produce significantly stronger reputational effects than traditional advertising, and with Wæraas and Solbakk (2009), who argued that a coherent, deliberately articulated institutional identity is foundational to sustained external recognition. The comparatively lower ratings recorded for items on clear identity communication and online reputation management suggest that, while broad branding efforts are recognised as valuable, the more technical and sustained aspects of reputation management remain areas for further institutional investment. This pattern is consistent with Taylor et al. (2025), who found that awareness and adoption of new digital tools among academic personnel in Rivers State-owned universities were still low, which would constrain any sustained programme of online reputation management. LongJohn (2021) similarly found that institutional communication among school heads in Port Harcourt was largely reactive and internally directed, which suggests that the communication competence on which strategic branding depends is still developing. The corresponding hypothesis test showed no significant difference between

the perceptions of university administrators and academic staff, suggesting a shared institutional understanding of the value of strategic branding across both levels of university leadership and practice.

The finding for research question two revealed that promoting global student and faculty exchange programmes improves visibility to enhance global ranking of public universities in Rivers State to a high extent, with the strengthening of global networks through exchange promotion, faculty exchange partnerships with international institutions, and the ability to attract international scholars rated among the most influential contributors. This finding is consistent with Shen, Xu, and Wang (2022), who reconceptualised international academic mobility as a mechanism through which universities function as active nodes in the global knowledge system, generating reputational and visibility gains that translate into improved ranking performance. It is further reinforced by Kwak and Chankseliani (2024), whose panel data analysis across 75 low- and middle-income countries found that the stock of internationally mobile students and the institutional networks built through exchange programmes are significant contributors to long-term improvements in institutional reputation and global academic standing. The comparatively lower rating recorded for the item on the elevated global presence of exchange participants is consistent with the observation of Enkhtur, Zhang, Li, and Chen (2024) that the reputational returns on mobility programmes often depend on how deliberately institutions capture and publicise the outcomes of their exchange participants, suggesting scope for more structured follow-through in this domain. The relevance of funding to participation is underscored by LongJohn and Amadi (2025), who reported that targeted financial support shaped the academic engagement of students in Rivers State universities, suggesting that funding arrangements are likely to determine how far exchange opportunities are actually taken up. Nwuke and Nwanguma (2024) added that the provision and utilisation of physical resources in public universities in Rivers State remained uneven, an institutional base that also conditions how far incoming scholars and exchange participants can be hosted. As with hypothesis one, the test of hypothesis two showed no significant difference in the mean ratings of university administrators and academic staff, reinforcing the overall pattern of convergent perception between institutional leadership and academic staff on the administrative strategies most relevant to enhancing university visibility and global ranking.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it was concluded that strategic branding and the promotion of global student and faculty exchange programmes function as effective reputational and mobility-based administrative levers that improve visibility to enhance the global ranking of public universities in Rivers State, and that these contributions are consistently rated at a high extent by both university administrators and academic staff. The absence of any significant difference in perception between the two groups of respondents on either strategy further indicates a convergent institutional understanding of what drives visibility gains through reputation-building and international human mobility, suggesting that, alongside the bibliometric drivers examined elsewhere in the literature, these two perception-based domains represent a coherent and evidence-supported complement for public universities in Rivers State that are seeking to improve their global ranking performance.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. University administrators should develop and implement comprehensive strategic branding plans that coherently articulate institutional identity, values and competitive strengths to diverse international audiences. Such plans should include professional media engagement strategies, regular publication of institutional achievement reports, participation in international university fairs, and the cultivation of positive reputational narratives that highlight universities' research contributions, community impact and quality of graduate outcomes.
2. The management of public universities in Rivers State should establish structured international student and faculty exchange programmes with partner institutions in well-ranked universities across Africa, Europe, Asia and the Americas. These programmes should be supported by formal Memoranda of Understanding, dedicated exchange programme offices, financial support mechanisms for outbound participants, and structured reintegration processes that ensure returning faculty and students actively disseminate the knowledge and networks acquired through their exchange experience.

3. University governing councils and government education agencies should support institutional branding and exchange promotion efforts with dedicated funding lines, recognising that these reputation-building and internationalisation strategies function most effectively when resourced as a coherent institutional priority rather than left to ad hoc departmental initiative, and that both strategies work most powerfully when coordinated with the research-focused strategies that anchor institutional academic reputation.

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