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Advancing against the odds: Lessons from CEE and SEE ranking leapfroggers

How universities in
Central, Eastern and
South-Eastern Europe
strengthen their global
position



Executive summary

Approximately one in three CEE and SEE universities appearing in the same subject ranking five years ago and today have risen substantially, strengthening their position as international challengers.

This is notable because the upper tiers remain highly stable and dominated by the Anglosphere, an advancing East Asia, and the strongest Western and Northern European systems—broadly reflecting the global distribution of economic resources and academic influence.

We analysed six years of ranking data to identify “leapfrogger universities” that progressed despite competing with significantly better-funded peers. Based on interviews and analysis of their research performance, visibility and strategic development, four lessons emerge:

Structural disadvantages make strategic focus essential.

Broad-based efforts are unlikely to overcome differences in resources and reputation. Universities need to concentrate investment where they have the strongest potential to advance.

Meaningful improvements are possible within a single ranking cycle.

Stronger institutional housekeeping - reliable data and clear responsibilities - ensures that performance is accurately captured. Focused visibility management makes existing strengths more recognisable internationally.

Substantial progress requires sustained institutional development.

Over a three- to four-year horizon, capability development can strengthen research performance and educational quality, while ecosystem positioning through alliances and partnerships expands access to talent, knowledge, resources and reputation.

Each leapfrogger follows an institution-specific path.

Successful examples provide direction but cannot be replicated mechanically. Each university must identify its distinctive strategic assets and build a focused approach around them.

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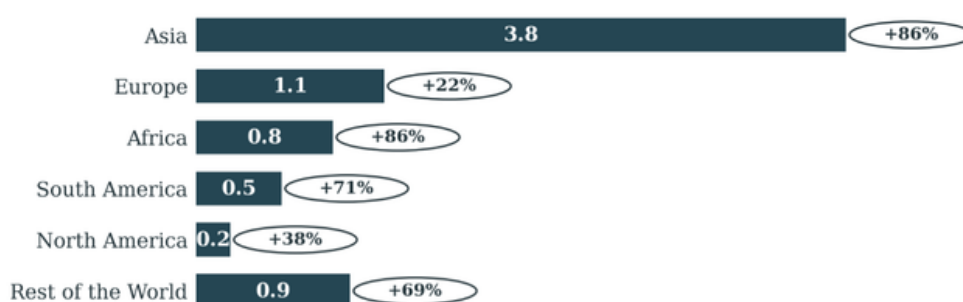
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Higher education in an era of international competition

Demand for **European higher education is under impending pressure**. Much of this stems from the gradual contraction of the domestic recruitment base across the continent: while the number of 18-24-year-olds in Europe is projected to slightly increase until 2030, it is expected to enter a decline thereafter. This is set to affect the post-2004 EU member states more severely than their Western and Nordic counterparts. The slow shrinkage of each subsequent generation, real-term budget cuts and at best stagnating competitiveness of HEIs have already contributed to falling tertiary education enrolment in many countries of the Central and Eastern European (CEE) and South-Eastern European (SEE) regions. This has been compounded by intra-European mobility, as roughly 6% of CEE students are studying abroad.¹ In the long run, as the demographic crisis deepens in the East, the westward flow of students within the continent is also likely to contract, pushing Western European HEIs to further ramp up recruitment efforts beyond Europe.

Both halves of the continent are therefore being pushed, through different mechanisms, towards the same conclusion: **international recruitment holds major growth potential for the European higher education sector**. The urgency is growing because the era of explosive expansion in global student mobility is moderately slowing down. Projections show that international enrolments will grow by 3.8% annually through 2030, down from 4.1% before the pandemic.² This marks a moderation after decades in which steady demographic growth and rising household purchasing power caused an explosion in student outflows from developing and middle-income countries, with Asia and Africa nearly doubling their outbound mobility between 2013 and 2023.³

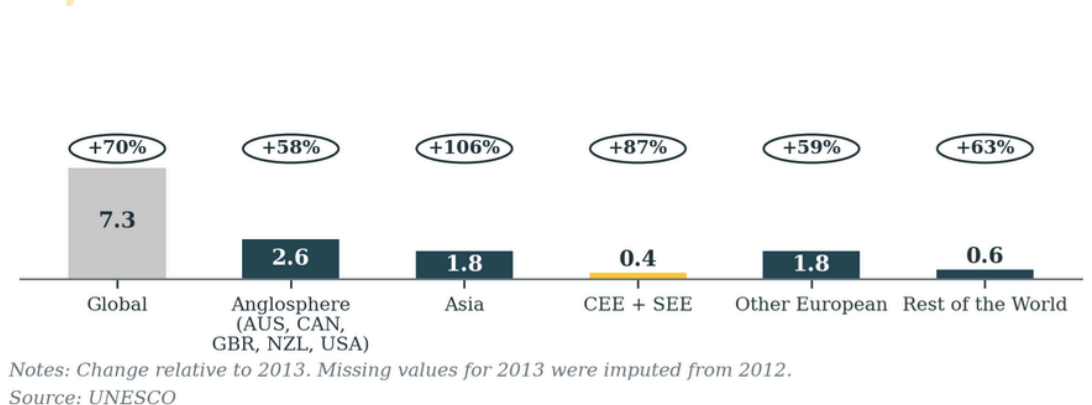
Figure 1 International students by region of origin (2023, million; growth % 2013-2023)
Asia accounts for over half of all international students, with the fastest growth since 2013



[1] Calculations based on Eurostat and national statistical agencies' data.
[2] QS Global Student Flows
[3] UNESCO

The internationalisation of higher education has gone hand in hand with a structural diversification of the global landscape. The traditional model in which the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada absorbed a dominant share of mobile students is giving way to a more distributed system. New regional hubs are emerging, particularly in Asia and the Middle East, offering high-quality programmes at lower cost and closer to source countries. Continental Europe is also benefiting from this rebalancing, partly because access to some long-standing top destinations in other regions has become more difficult, and partly because the quality and visibility of its own universities have improved. Although public discussion around competition in higher education still centres on Western Europe, the same trends have been emerging in regions traditionally seen as peripheral. HEIs in Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltics recorded an almost twofold increase in non-EU internationally mobile students between 2013 and 2023, driven mainly by inflows from Sub-Saharan Africa and South-East Asia.⁴ These dynamics imply that CEE and SEE universities have to step up a weight class in a rapidly recalibrating market.

Figure 2 | **Inbound internationally mobile students (2023, million)**
Every destination region has seen growth, with emerging hubs outpacing traditional ones



This opportunity is opening at the same time as **changing labour market demands are redefining what students expect from higher education.** HEIs are no longer judged solely on academic prestige, but also on their ability to provide relevant skills and employability. This is especially true for internationally mobile students: at least half of third-country national students say they intend to remain in their destination country after graduation.⁵ In this context, institutions which adapt their offering to the needs of the job market can capture a sizeable pool of students.

Competition gradually stretches beyond the traditional university sector. Certificate-bearing e-learning platforms, free online courses and a growing arsenal of LLM-based tools are democratising knowledge in ways that make prospective students more sceptical about whether conventional degrees are still worth the investment.

[4] UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2026
[5] QS International Student Survey 2026

Short-cycle tertiary providers, vocational pathways and distance-learning formats are gaining momentum by promising faster pathways into the world of work. Traditional HEIs therefore face pressure from outside their usual peer group and must respond by demonstrating their relevance to students, employers and policymakers alike.

All these trends converge on a single strategic conclusion: CEE and SEE universities grow ever more dependent on their ability to compete for attention beyond their domestic systems.

Competition now unfolds simultaneously at national and global levels, across a more diverse set of providers and in front of more outcome-conscious audiences. Many HEIs are not yet equipped to compete in this new environment and must adjust their strategy to strengthen their global visibility and prestige in the race for prospective applicants. Institutions that succeed in doing so will be better placed to offset demographic decline and attract internationally mobile students; those that fall short will have fewer levers to pull as the tides turn against them.



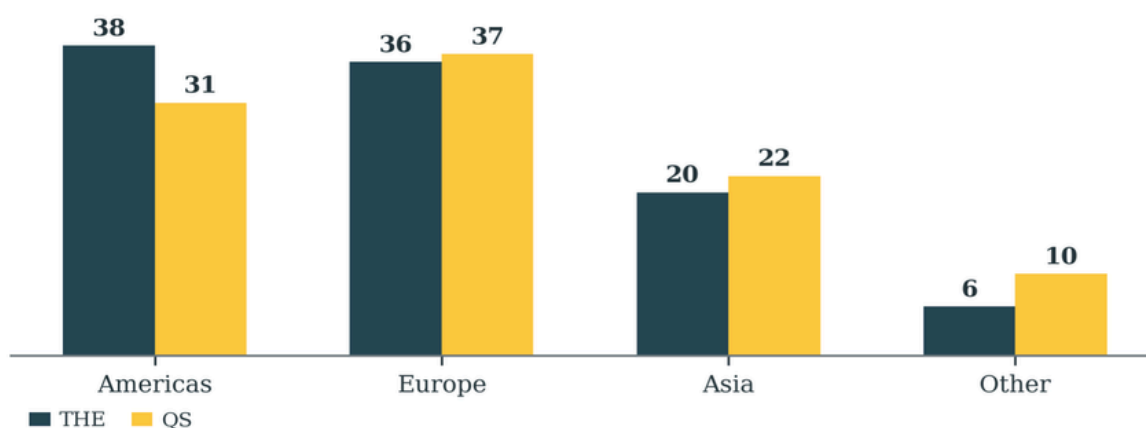
Competitive positions in global rankings

What trends in rankings reveal about higher education

Rankings cannot capture the full complexity of university performance, **but they provide the most widely used proxies for relative institutional competitiveness.** This report therefore draws on the *Quacquarelli Symonds (QS)* and *Times Higher Education (THE)* rankings, whose different methodologies nevertheless reveal a similar geographic pattern.⁶

In both rankings, the list of top 100 remains dominated by the United States and the United Kingdom. Together with Australia and Canada, Anglophone systems account for more than half of the institutions in this elite group, while continental Europe retains a substantial presence through its established academic systems.

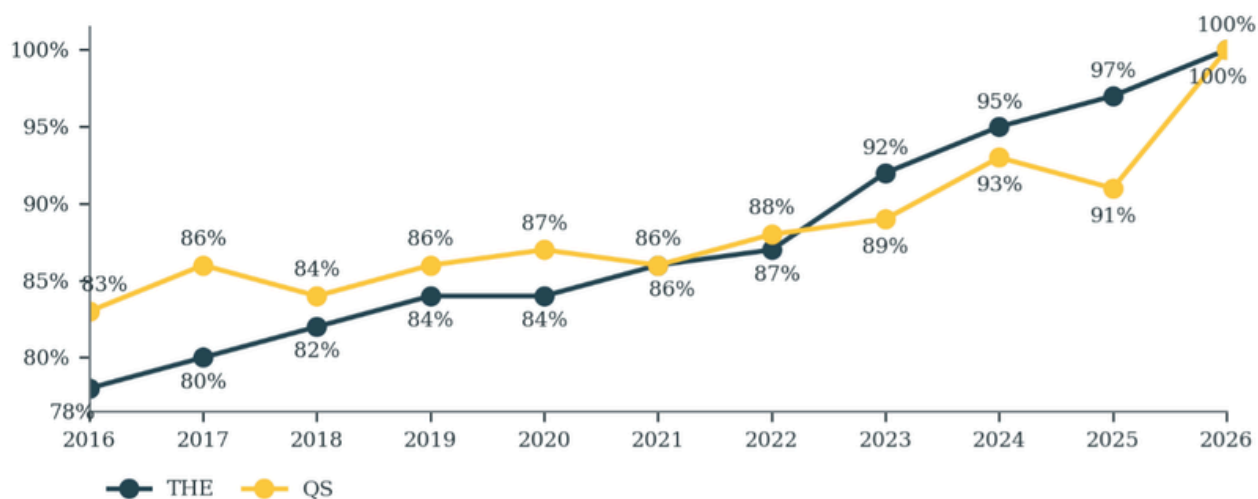
Figure 3 | **Regional shares in the top 100 of overall rankings (2026, %)**
Global academic leadership is currently concentrated in Western universities



The **upper tier is also highly stable**: 78 institutions in the 2026 THE top 100 and 83 in the QS top 100 were already there a decade earlier. This reflects cumulative advantages in resources, reputation, talent, policy support and access to international research networks, and their familiarity with the methodology of these rankings. These factors make it difficult for smaller or more specialised institutions to displace established leaders.

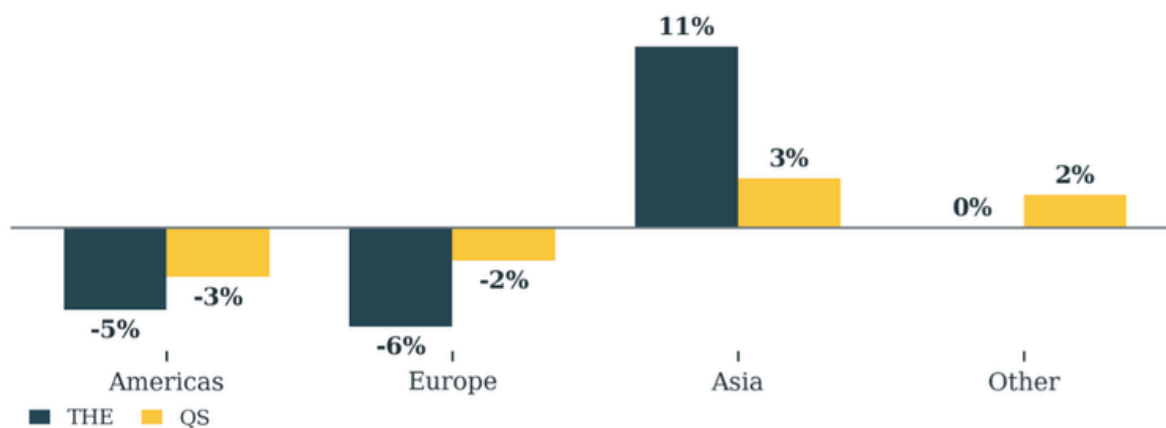
[6] Further detail on the rankings is provided in Appendix II.

Figure 4 Historical ranking stability for universities in the top 100 of rankings
Both rankings show that the top 100 has barely changed over the past 10 years



Beneath this stability, **however, the global landscape is shifting**. Asian universities increased their share of the top 100 from 16% in 2015 to 22% in 2026, gradually narrowing the gap with Western institutions.

Figure 5 Evolution of regional shares in the top 100 of overall rankings, 2016-2026
Asia makes big gains while Western universities keep losing ground

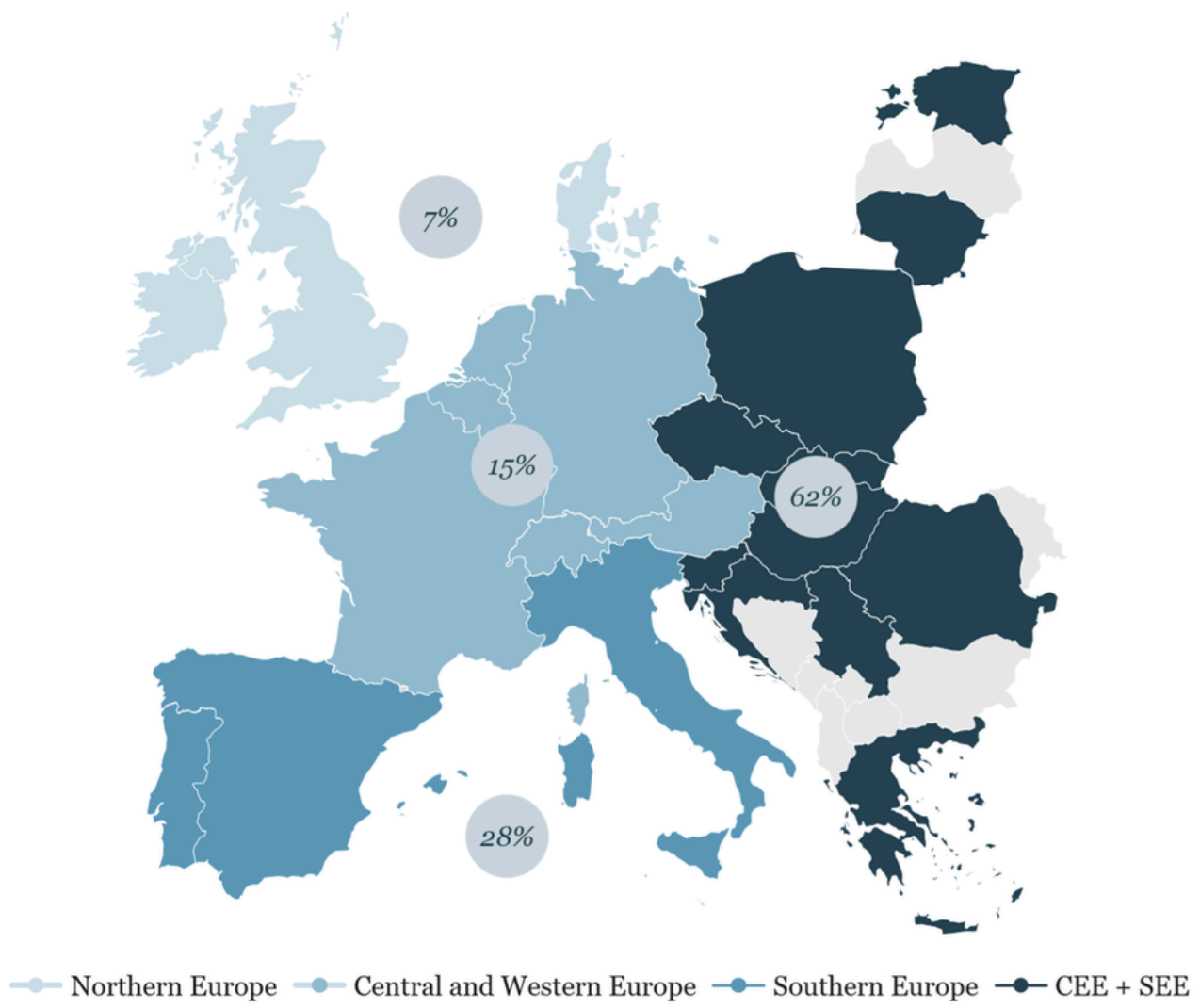


Within Europe, momentum is increasingly visible beyond the traditional academic core. Since 2020, the number of CEE and SEE universities appearing in the top 200 of at least one QS Subject Ranking⁷ increased from 26 to 42 (+62%), compared with 14% growth in the rest of Europe. Poland and Czechia stand out: in both countries, the number of universities represented in the upper segment of a subject ranking has at least doubled.

[7] QS ranks universities in 3 granularity layers. World University Ranking compares universities on an institutional level, 5 subject area rankings form the second layer, while the most granular layer compares institutions across 55 subjects.

Although these regions still trail established Western systems, their international visibility is clearly strengthening.

Figure 6 | Growth in the number of universities appearing in the top 200 of at least one QS Subject Ranking by region, 2020-2026



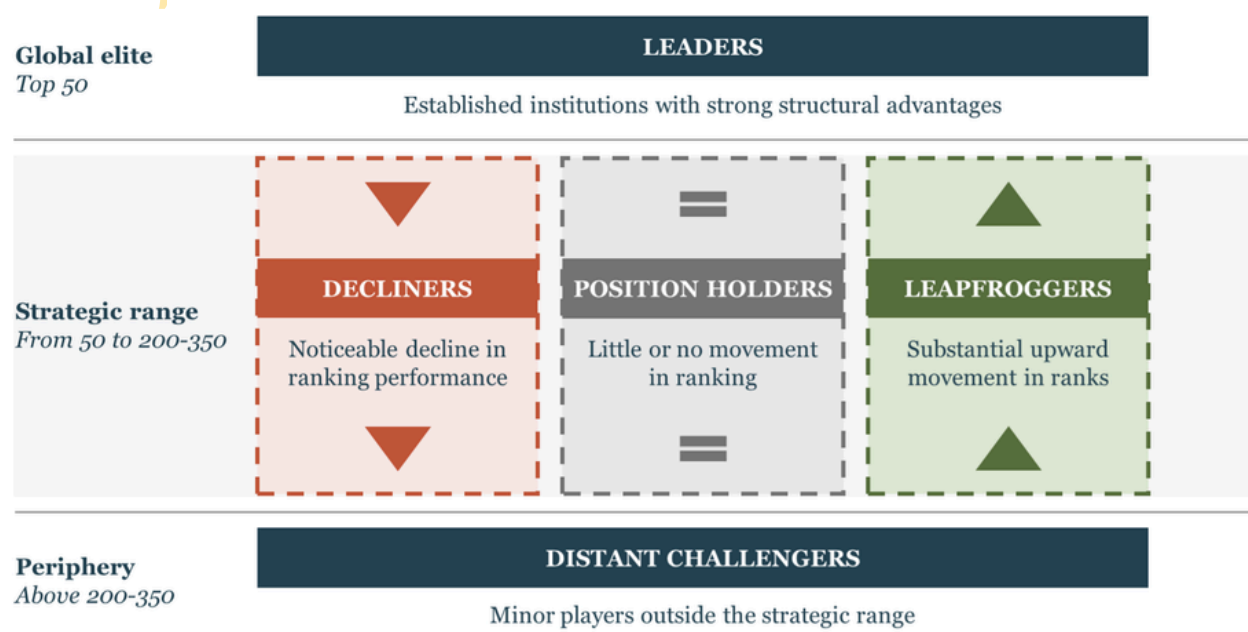
Leapfrogger universities: a playbook for success

The most informative movement occurs in the contestable 50-350 band of subject rankings, where universities face global competition, but within a narrower field.

We define as leapfroggers those institutions that have achieved meaningful improvement since 2020 and reached a strategically relevant challenger position.

These cases are especially important because they show where upward mobility may point to replicable drivers of institutional progress, offering insight into how universities can reposition themselves in an increasingly crowded global field.⁸

Figure 7 A framework for identifying ranking leapfroggers



We reviewed all three granularity levels⁹ of QS rankings and both levels of THE rankings, focusing on CEE and SEE. **Of the 65 regional universities present** in the same ranking in both 2020 and 2026, **22 met the leapfrogger criteria** – roughly one in three. They are concentrated in seven countries, led by Poland (five), Hungary (five) and Czechia (four).

[8] Further details on the methodology (including our definition of „meaningful improvement“) are provided in Appendix III.

[9] QS ranks universities in 3 granularity layers. World University Ranking compares universities on an institutional level, 5 subject area rankings form the second layer (Arts & Humanities, Engineering & Technology, Life Sciences & Medicine, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences and Management), while the most granular layer compares institutions across 55 subjects.

Table 1 CEE and SEE leapfrogger universities by ranking and subject area

Name	Country	All	QS	THE	A&H	Eng.	Life	Nat.	Soc.
University of Warsaw	PL	9	7	2	●	●	●	●	●
Charles University	CZ	3	3	0	●		●		
Jagiellonian University	PL	3	2	1	●				
University of Tartu	EE	3	1	2	●				●
Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań	PL	1	1	0	●				
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki	GR	1	1	0			●		
Babeş-Bolyai University ¹¹	RO	1	1	0				●	
Brno University of Technology	CZ	1	1	0		●			
Budapest University of Technology and Economics	HU	1	1	0		●			
Czech Technical University in Prague	CZ	1	1	0		●			
Eötvös Loránd University	HU	1	1	0	●				
MATE Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences	HU	1	1	0			●		
Mendel University in Brno	CZ	1	1	0			●		
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens	GR	1	1	0	●				
National Technical University of Athens	GR	1	1	0		●			
Poznan University of Life Sciences	PL	1	1	0			●		
USAMV Cluj-Napoca	RO	1	1	0			●		
University of Bucharest	RO	1	1	0	●				
University of Ljubljana	SI	1	1	0			●		
Warsaw University of Technology	PL	1	1	0			●		
Semmelweis University	HU	1	0	1			●		
Óbuda University	HU	1	0	1		●			

One common pattern across their stories is that comprehensive institutional transformations are relatively rare. Only three universities qualify as leapfroggers in either one of the two overall rankings: the University of Warsaw (PL) in QS and Semmelweis University (HU) and Óbuda University¹⁰ (HU) in THE. **Most universities instead build on their existing strengths, so their progress stays confined to specific subject areas.** Only three universities managed to leapfrog in at least two different subject areas: Charles University from the Czech Republic, the University of Tartu from Estonia and the University of Warsaw from Poland. An even stricter test is whether a university meets the leapfrogging criteria in both ranking systems, since this validates progress by different methodologies. Again, only three universities do: the University of Warsaw (PL), Jagiellonian University (PL) and the University of Tartu (ES).

[10] Óbuda University first appeared in THE overall ranking in 2022 at the 1001-1200 range and managed to reach 601-800 by 2025. They are also present in THE Engineering in the 601-800 range each year between 2020-2026.

[11] Babeş-Bolyai University ranked 201st in the QS Mathematics Subject Ranking in 2026, after appearing in the top 200 a year earlier. Nonetheless, we made an exception and classified it as a leapfrogger due to its substantial improvement of 200 positions since 2020.

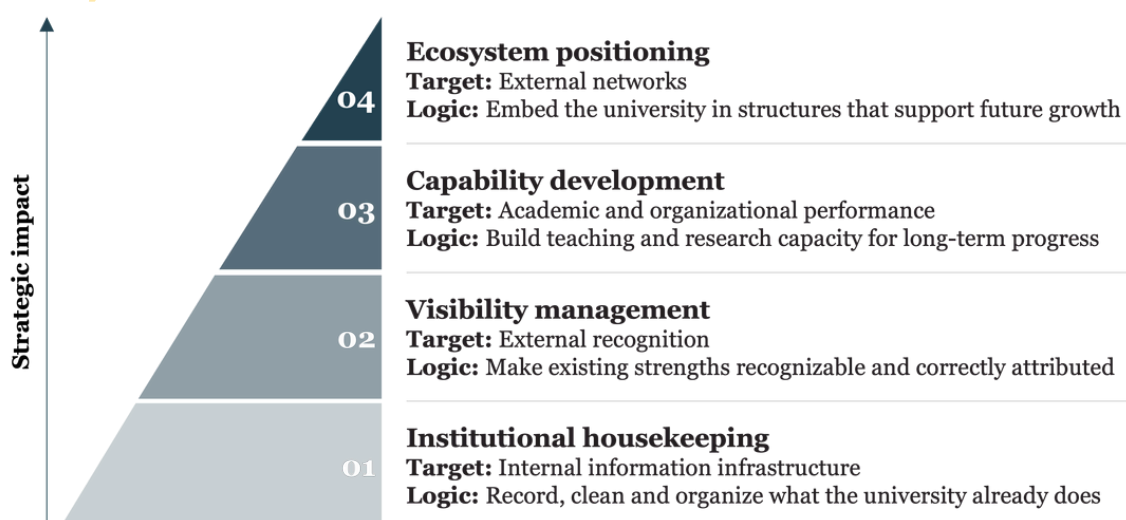
Levers of institutional transformation

For universities seeking to improve their international position, rankings do not offer a straightforward operational manual: their inner workings are not easy to interpret, and the composite results inevitably oversimplify complex realities. What they do provide, however, is a common benchmark that can expose gaps in specific areas. In this sense, rankings function primarily as a coordination mechanism that connects different strategic levers around the goal of improving competitiveness.

The evidence from leapfroggers suggests that success is rarely the product of a single intervention. Their progress is better understood as a multi-layered process in which they use a portfolio of actions at different depths and time horizons. A simple way to classify these interventions is to distinguish four levers, that contribute to institutional development and directly improve ranking results:

- Institutional housekeeping** improves how the institution manages its internal data management and data collection processes
- Visibility management** concerns how the university is seen by external audiences and how effectively its strengths are made transparent to external, international parties
- Capability development** goes further by creating new value through strengthening the underlying research, teaching and administrative capacities
- Ecosystem positioning** connects the university to wider opportunity pools, expanding its access to financial, intellectual and relational resources

Figure 8 Four levers of institutional transformation



While each lever has a distinct focus, in practice they are deeply interdependent. For example, institutional housekeeping may produce better data, but it will not improve external recognition without visibility management. Reputational gains are bound to be short-lived if they are not backed by substantive capability development. Stronger research and teaching that remain disconnected from international networks may never translate into the partnerships, citations, or employer recognition that rankings capture. Ecosystem positioning without internal coordination may create opportunities that the university cannot fully absorb. The implication is that leapfrogging is ultimately a question of how well these mechanisms amplify each other.

These levers become visible through the concrete steps universities take. Our interviews with leaders of leapfrogger institutions and our analysis of leapfroggers' data reveal that institutions draw on a relatively consistent repertoire of interventions to improve their global standing, regardless of their profile or national contexts. These actions can be assessed across five dimensions that rankings also measure: reputation, research quality, teaching environment, global outreach and industry relations.



Institutional housekeeping: building the foundations for measurable improvement

Institutional housekeeping is the foundation of any credible ranking improvement programme. Universities cannot manage what they do not measure, and rankings cannot reflect achievements that institutions fail to record or report accurately. Before investing in visibility campaigns, partnerships or capability development, universities therefore need reliable data, processes and responsibilities.

Typical institutional diagnosis

The main problem is often not the absence of relevant achievements, but the fragmentation of information across the institution. Research outputs, international partnerships and professional contacts may exist, yet remain inconsistently recorded or held by individual faculties and academics.

Typical warning signs include:

- ! incomplete or outdated publication records and researcher profiles
- ! ranking data collected as an annual administrative exercise
- ! inconsistent definitions and data sources across faculties
- ! unclear ownership of ranking indicators
- ! international and employer contacts stored in personal rather than institutional systems
- ! limited leadership overview of institutional and subject-level performance

These gaps are particularly common in large, decentralised universities, where substantial academic assets accumulate without being consolidated or used strategically.

Priority actions

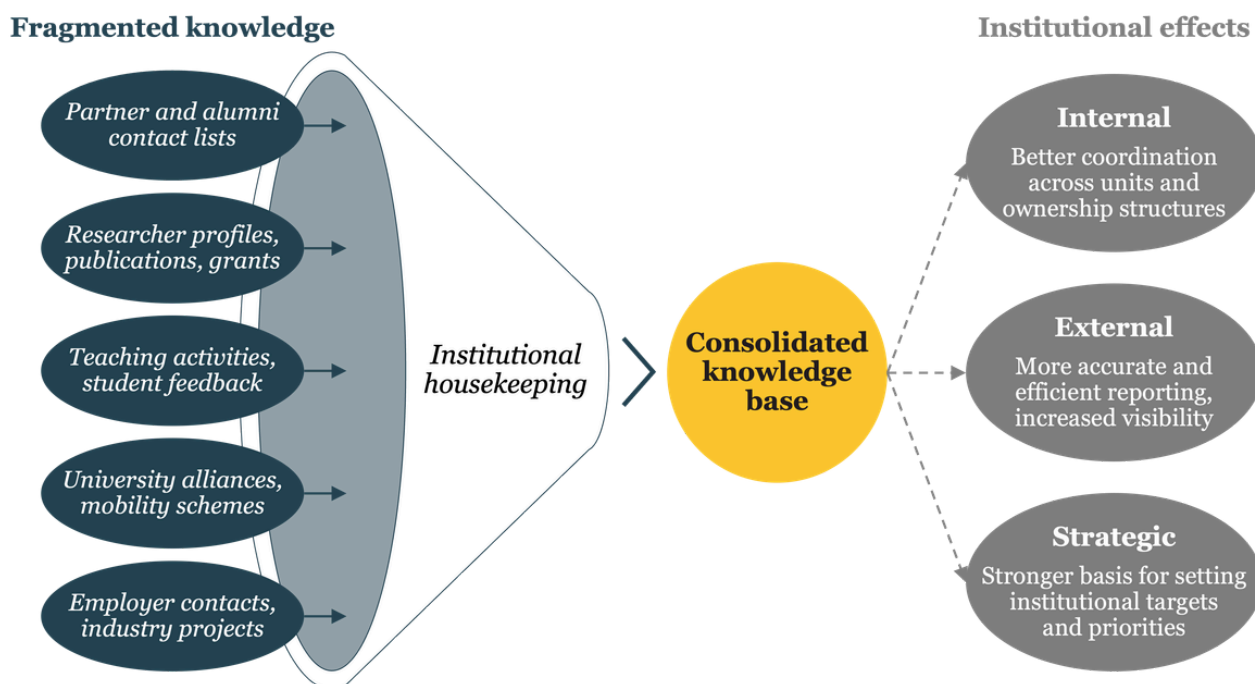
1. Improving the accuracy of core institutional information.

At *University of Warsaw*, this began with updating researcher profiles, correcting publication records and reviewing information systems. Although operational in nature, these interventions improved the institutions' understanding of its achievements, and, thereby, directly influenced how accurately the university's performance was represented.

2. Turning fragmented information into usable institutional knowledge.

Warsaw University of Technology created a searchable platform containing international cooperation opportunities and information on foreign researchers who had previously worked with the university. *Babes-Bolyai University* similarly consolidated dispersed assets and, in the process, identified strengths and relationships that the central administration had not previously recognised. Even more importantly, it produced a consolidated knowledge base that could feed into internal coordination, external visibility and strategic decision-making, simultaneously.

Figure 9 The mechanism behind institutional housekeeping
A consolidated knowledge base creates benefits through internal, external and strategic channels



3. Establishing clear governance

Relevant information is produced across faculties, research units, international offices, communications teams and central administration. A dedicated ranking or institutional performance office can coordinate standards and analysis, but centralisation alone is insufficient. *Warsaw University of Technology* distributed this responsibility across the whole institution by assigning a rankings representative to each faculty. This made it easier to collect information from those parts of the university where relevant knowledge is produced, and integrated rankings-related tasks into general institutional thinking and routines. The most effective model therefore combines central standards and oversight with decentralised ownership of data.



Visibility management: converting institutional strengths into international recognition

Institutional performance does not automatically translate into international recognition. Universities may already possess strong research areas, industry relationships or educational achievements, yet remain largely invisible beyond their immediate networks. Visibility management aims to close this gap by making institutional strengths easier for prospective students, academics, employers and partners -and also ranking agencies- to identify and understand.

This lever is closely connected to reputation indicators, but it should not be reduced to short-term ranking optimisation. Its purpose is to ensure that genuine institutional achievements circulate widely enough to influence how the university is perceived internationally.

Typical institutional diagnosis

The need for stronger visibility management is usually indicated by a gap between the university's actual performance and its external recognition.

Typical warning signs include:

- ! strong academic or professional achievements that are poorly known outside the institution
- ! an international website that is fragmented, outdated or difficult to navigate
- ! research strengths and cooperation opportunities that are not presented clearly
- ! limited presence at international academic and professional events
- ! academic and employer relationships that are not systematically activated
- ! reputation management treated mainly as a communications responsibility rather than an institution-wide task

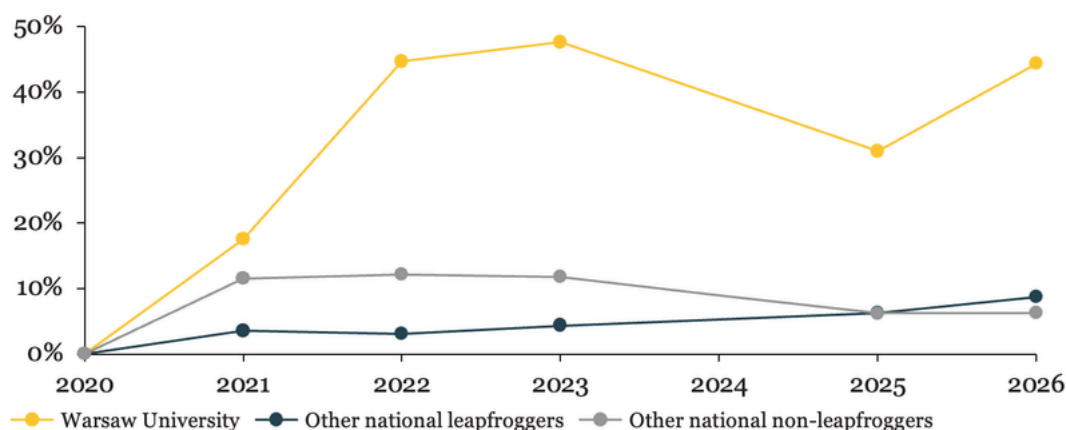
These problems are particularly relevant in CEE and SEE, where universities may perform strongly in selected areas but lack the international networks and communication capacity through which reputation is built.

Priority actions

1. Improving the university's international-facing online presence.

The institutional website is often the main point of contact for prospective students, researchers and partners. It should present the university's areas of expertise, research outputs, academic profiles and opportunities for cooperation in a coherent and accessible format. *University of Warsaw* addressed this challenge by making its online presence more consistent and easier for international audiences to navigate. Its relative position in the Webometrics Visibility indicator improved by almost 50% since 2020, while comparable non-leapfrogging institutions from the same country lost ground. Although visibility metrics cannot establish causality on their own, the pattern suggests that deliberate digital improvement can contribute to stronger external recognition.

Figure 10 Improvement in the visibility ranking of selected universities, 2020-2026
Overhauling its international website helped *University of Warsaw* outperform its peers in visibility



Note: Values show improvement in position relative to the baseline year (2020 = 0%) within each group.
Source: Webometrics Global Web Rankings for Universities

Website development should be supported by a **broader content strategy**. Universities can increase the reach of their work through international newsletters, accessible research profiles, thematic landing pages and more systematic communication of institutional achievements. The objective is not simply to publish more content, but to make the university's distinctive strengths easier to recognize among selected audiences. *MATE University (Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences)* applies this logic through its international profile-building initiative, which seeks to organise external communication around selected academic strengths and priority international audiences. Rather than promoting the university through a generic institutional message, the initiative aims to present clearer thematic profiles that can support the attraction of international researchers, students and partners. It demonstrates how visibility management can connect institutional strengths with targeted international positioning.

2. Strengthening personal engagement in international networks.

Digital visibility alone cannot substitute for direct academic and professional relationships. University leaders and academic staff can use conferences, research networks and professional events to present institutional achievements and build recognition among relevant audiences. Several interviewed universities invested not only in the international presence of senior leadership, but also in enabling researchers to participate in international events. These personal interactions strengthen institutional reputation in ways that central communications teams cannot reproduce independently.

3. Connecting visibility management to institutional data and relationship systems.

At *University of Warsaw*, the collection of information on academic staff and research outputs was complemented by a public-facing platform that translated internal data into accessible external profiles. This ensured that visibility efforts were based on verified institutional information rather than isolated communication campaigns.

A similar principle applies to reputation indicators. At a leading Polish university, systematic data collection enabled the institution to identify academic and employer contacts relevant to the QS reputation surveys. Because these relationships were primarily held by individual researchers and faculties, the university tested both centralised outreach and researcher-led engagement. The latter was considered more effective because it relied on established personal relationships. Since 2020, the university's QS reputation scores have increased by more than 50%. This example highlights an important principle: central teams should coordinate reputation management, but external relationships are often most effectively activated by the academics who already hold them.

Capability development: building the substance behind long-term progress

Institutional housekeeping and visibility management can help universities represent their existing performance more accurately, but their impact is inherently limited. Sustained international advancement requires universities to strengthen the underlying capabilities that improve research quality, teaching excellence and organisational performance.

Capability development includes the funding instruments, organisational structures, support services and educational innovations through which universities create new institutional value. Unlike visibility-oriented interventions, these measures typically require sustained investment and take several years to produce measurable results.

Typical institutional diagnosis

The need for capability development is usually indicated by weaknesses that cannot be addressed through improved reporting or communication alone.

Typical warning signs include:

- ! research funding is fragmented across short-term, narrowly defined projects
- ! institutional resources are not concentrated around strategic priorities
- ! departments operate in a siloed way, limiting interdisciplinary cooperation
- ! laboratories, equipment and research infrastructure are outdated
- ! early-career researchers lack sufficient financial, professional and organisational support
- ! administrative burdens reduce the time academics can devote to research and teaching
- ! researchers receive limited support in accessing major national and international grants
- ! curricula and teaching do not sufficiently reflect changing student preferences, labour-market expectations or technological developments

These challenges are particularly significant in CEE and SEE, where chronic underfunding limits universities' ability to launch and sustain long-term development programmes. Several interviewees identified financing as the principal constraint on institutional improvement. Sometimes existing governmental funding instruments unintentionally work against successful development. Government programmes and research grants are often short-term or tied to narrowly defined deliverables, leaving universities with disconnected initiatives that cannot be combined around institutional priorities.

Priority actions

1. Aligning investment with a limited number of institutional strengths.

Capability development is more effective when universities concentrate resources around clearly defined research and educational priorities rather than distributing funding across unrelated initiatives. The Polish IDUB (Excellence Initiative – Research University) programme provides an example of how more flexible and strategically aligned funding can support this approach. Launched in 2019, the programme selected ten universities through a national competition and provided them with a 10% annual funding increase. All four Polish leapfrogger universities were among the beneficiaries. *University of Warsaw* and *Warsaw University of Technology* used the funding to define priority research areas, support thematic programmes, encourage cooperation between historically independent departments and improve laboratories and equipment. A similar concentration logic can be observed at *MATE University*, where the Flagship Research Groups programme channels institutional attention and support towards selected areas of research excellence. These examples show that additional resources generate the greatest value when universities can align them with their own priorities and connect individual investments through a coherent development agenda.

2. Strengthening the development and retention of young researchers, particularly those at the beginning of their careers.

Universities in the region face a shrinking pool of young academics, growing living costs and continued brain drain towards better-funded systems. These pressures make the active development of junior researchers an institutional necessity. Several universities offer training in academic writing, research methodology, data analysis and the responsible use of AI. Such programmes address practical barriers to academic progression. *University of Warsaw* combines individual support with structural mechanisms designed for young academics, who often face disadvantages in conventional grant competitions because of their limited track record.

Warsaw University of Technology operates several grant and recognition schemes funded through institutional, national and European resources. It also established a Council of Young Researchers, with representatives from different disciplines, to advocate for junior academics and organise seminars and workshops. These examples suggest that early-career support should combine individual development opportunities with institutional structures that give young researchers access to funding, representation and professional networks.

3. Reducing the administrative barriers that constrain academic performance.

Researchers are increasingly expected to combine teaching and research with organisational, reporting and project-management responsibilities. This reduces the time available for substantive academic work and limits participation in complex international funding programmes. *University of Warsaw* established a central office supporting researchers applying for ERC grants and other European schemes, enabled by its IDUB funding. University leaders ensure its systematic involvement in all relevant projects. *Babes-Bolyai University* provides administrative assistance for national and international calls and offers specialised proposal-writing training for young researchers. These services not only reduce workload but also help translate academic ideas into competitive applications. Research support should therefore be treated as an academic capability rather than a peripheral administrative function.

4. Modernising educational provision.

Long-term capability development concerns not only research, but also what universities teach and how learning is organised. Several institutions are responding to changing student expectations and labour-market needs by developing more interdisciplinary formats, strengthening hands-on and soft-skill development and placing greater emphasis on workforce readiness. AI is also becoming part of curriculum renewal, both as an area of study and as a technology influencing teaching practices and student support. Universities appear most able to develop innovative programmes in areas where they already possess academic traditions or reputational strengths. Some leapfroggers also seek to attract back internationally trained academics, who can introduce new methodologies and approaches into teaching and research. Institutions are additionally experimenting with more flexible study formats, including personalised learning paths that allow students to adapt their education to their circumstances and career objectives. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this process by forcing universities to invest rapidly in distance-learning capabilities.

Ecosystem positioning: turning relationships into institutional advantage

The first three levers improve what a university knows, communicates and does. Ecosystem positioning determines whether these strengths connect to larger pools of talent, knowledge, funding and reputation.

It concerns how universities embed themselves in international academic, economic and social environments through student and researcher mobility, institutional alliances and industry partnerships. The objective is not to accumulate as many relationships as possible, but to develop a portfolio of active connections that reinforces institutional priorities and generates opportunities over time.

Typical institutional diagnosis

The need for stronger ecosystem positioning is usually indicated not by a lack of formal partnerships, but by a limited ability to convert relationships into institutional value.

Typical warning signs include:

- ! numerous cooperation agreements but few active joint programmes or projects
- ! international relationships concentrated in individual faculties or researchers
- ! no clear priorities regarding target regions, institutions or industries
- ! mobility and partnership programmes disconnected from strategic research areas
- ! alliance membership functioning mainly as a reputational label
- ! international recruitment growing faster than the services supporting students
- ! industry collaboration concentrated in a few personal or field-specific relationships
- ! limited institutional visibility on which partnerships are active and what they produce

These weaknesses prevent universities from using their external relationships systematically. Partnerships may create isolated successes, but they rarely generate cumulative institutional advantage unless they are aligned with internal strengths and supported by appropriate structures.

Priority actions

1. Build a strategic partnership portfolio.

Universities should identify the external resources they need and the relationships best suited to provide them. Different partnerships serve different purposes: academic partners may provide access to knowledge and research infrastructure, alliances can support mobility and joint education, industry partners can offer applied research opportunities, and selected regions may provide access to international students and talent. The most credible strategies build on assets the university already possesses. *Babes-Bolyai University* operates in an ethnically diverse region that supports a multilingual programme portfolio in Romanian, Hungarian and German. It also maintains long-standing ties with Francophone Africa developed through academic exchange and regional networks. These linguistic, cultural and historical connections reduce the distance between the university and selected international markets. Such assets cannot necessarily be replicated by other institutions. The transferable lesson is that universities should identify the geographic, linguistic and academic relationships in which they possess a credible advantage, rather than pursuing generic internationalisation across all markets.

2. Create two-way flows of talent and knowledge.

Internationalisation should attract students and researchers while also enabling the university's own academic community to build relationships abroad. International student recruitment can diversify revenues and reduce dependence on domestic demographic trends, but it must be supported by appropriate programmes and services throughout the student lifecycle. *Warsaw University of Technology* opened a Welcome Point in 2024 to assist international students with residence procedures and other administrative obligations. Such services help students integrate into both the institution and the host country, ensuring that internationalisation does not end with enrolment. Researcher mobility is equally important, as it provides access to new methods, infrastructure and networks and can support internationally co-authored research. All interviewed leapfroggers had introduced some form of funding for international research mobility. However, the design of these programmes must reflect researchers' practical needs.

University of Warsaw found that one- or two-year placements attracted limited interest, while *Warsaw University of Technology* also reported stronger demand for stays of three to six months. Universities should therefore prioritise feasible mobility formats that are connected to strategic academic areas and can lead to lasting research cooperation, rather than focusing on the duration or volume of mobility alone.

3. Activate alliances as operating platforms.

International alliances can institutionalise cooperation that would otherwise depend on individual relationships. For universities in CEE and SEE, European university alliances provide structured access to international partners and long-term frameworks for collaboration. Their value lies not simply in membership, but in the activities they enable. Alliances can support student and staff mobility, joint programmes, curriculum harmonisation, credit recognition, staff development, shared research infrastructure and collaborative funding applications. They can therefore function as operating platforms through which universities build capabilities that would be difficult to develop alone. For leapfrogger universities, alliance membership can be both a recognition of progress and a lever for further development. *Babes-Bolyai's* growing visibility led to invitations to join The Guild and the EUTOPIA alliance. Participation in these networks created new opportunities for collaboration and contributed to the university attracting more Horizon funding than its national peers. This demonstrates a self-reinforcing process: stronger performance and visibility provide access to more valuable networks, which in turn generate further opportunities, resources and recognition.

4. Move from isolated industry contacts to institutional partnerships

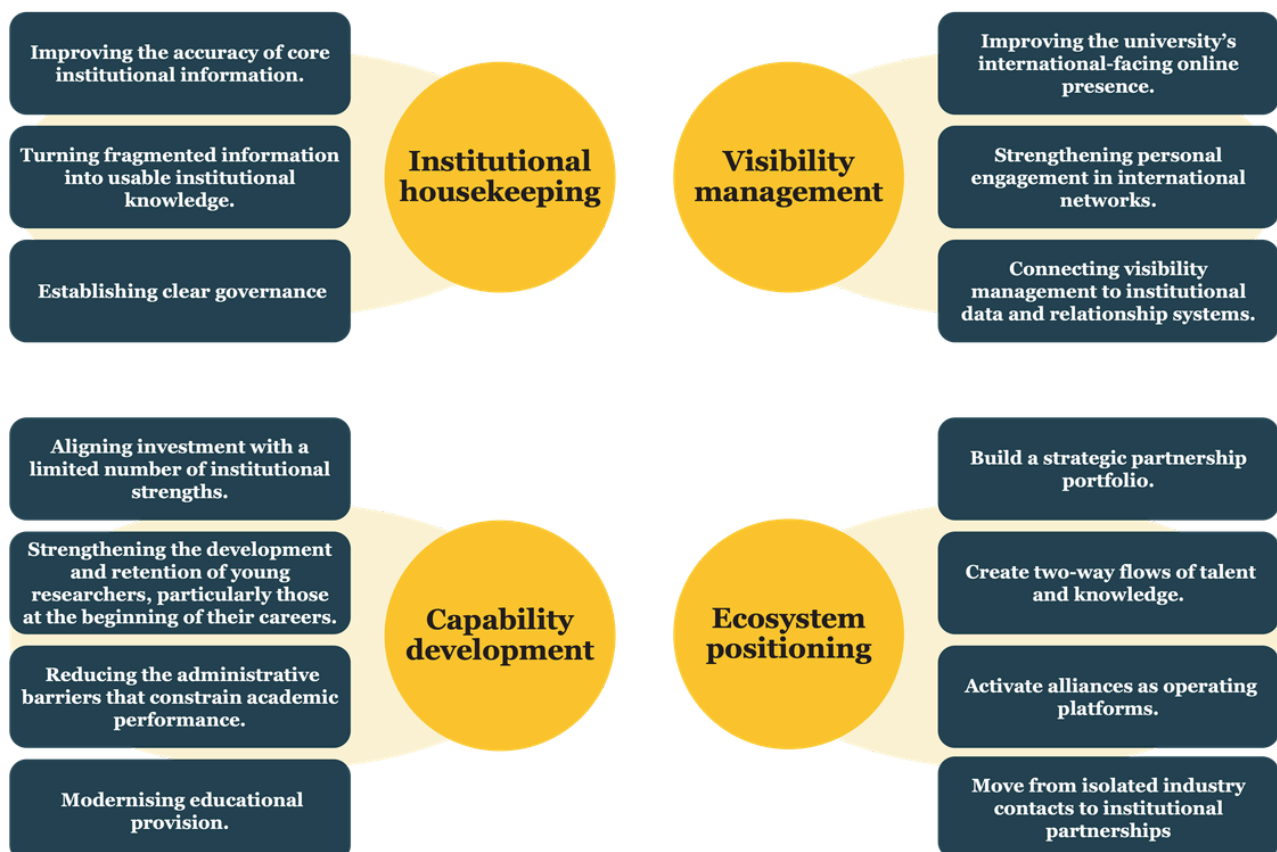
Industry cooperation can provide universities with greater visibility, credibility and access to infrastructure, while offering partners academic expertise and a pipeline of graduates. Most leapfrogger universities have established dedicated industry cooperation offices, and several also operate incubators or accelerators. Technical universities often have an advantage because their applied disciplines provide a natural basis for collaboration. At *Warsaw University of Technology*, employers contribute to teaching through guest lectures and applied learning, while the university conducts joint projects with private-sector and government partners, including work on dual-use technologies. Such cooperation is harder to scale at classical universities and in disciplines with weaker links to private-sector demand. Universities should therefore institutionalise industry engagement through dedicated structures and develop forms of cooperation that match their disciplinary strengths. The objective is to turn individual projects and contacts into sustained partnerships that contribute to teaching, research and innovation.

Conclusion: from ranking ambition to institutional transformation

The global university hierarchy is highly stable, but it is not entirely closed. The experience of CEE and SEE institutions shows that meaningful upward movement remains possible, particularly in subject rankings and in the challenger segment below the global elite. However, such progress is rarely comprehensive. Most leapfroggers advance by building on established academic strengths in selected fields rather than transforming their position across the institution at once.

Their experience also shows that ranking improvement cannot be traced to a single intervention. It results from a portfolio of mutually reinforcing actions. Institutional housekeeping establishes reliable data, responsibilities and internal coordination. Visibility management ensures that existing strengths become recognisable to international audiences. Capability development improves the substance of research, education and academic support. Ecosystem positioning connects these capabilities to wider pools of talent, knowledge, funding and reputation.

Figure 11 Concluded priority actions by the four levers of institutional transformation



The sequence and combination of these levers matter. Better data may improve reporting, but it cannot compensate for weak academic performance. Visibility campaigns may create short-term recognition, but their effects will fade without substantive capability development. Strong research and teaching may remain internationally marginal if they are disconnected from external networks. Partnerships, in turn, generate limited value if the university lacks the internal capacity to absorb the opportunities they create.

Universities should therefore avoid starting with a generic ambition to “improve their ranking”. The first step should be a realistic diagnosis of their starting position: where they possess credible strengths, where performance is underrecognised, and which institutional constraints prevent further development. This diagnosis should inform a limited set of priorities rather than a broad portfolio of disconnected initiatives.

Rankings should ultimately be treated as an external signal and a coordination mechanism, not as the final objective of institutional strategy. The strongest transformation programmes create value beyond ranking positions: they improve research quality, make education more relevant, attract talent, strengthen partnerships and diversify access to resources. Ranking gains are most credible and durable when they reflect these underlying improvements.

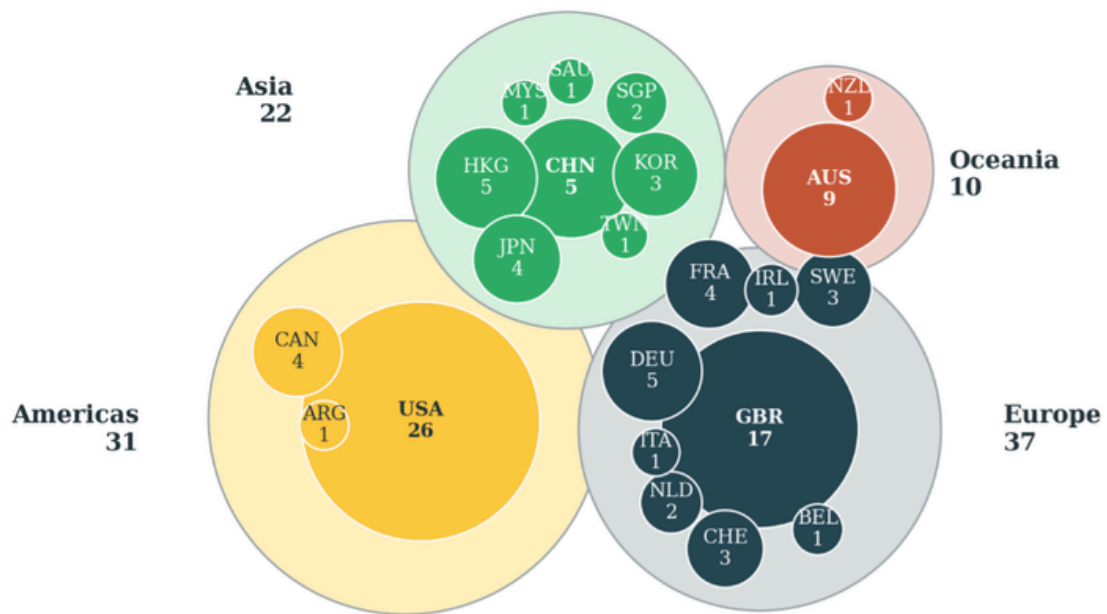
There is no universal playbook for leapfrogging. Institutional profile, disciplinary strengths, national funding conditions and historical relationships all shape what is possible. The transferable lesson is therefore not a fixed set of interventions, but a strategic approach: focus on areas of credible advantage, align the four levers around shared priorities, and sustain implementation long enough for cumulative effects to emerge. Universities that can make this shift—from managing ranking indicators to building institutional advantage – will be best positioned to compete in the changing international higher education landscape.



Appendix

Appendix I. Breakdown of the top 100 universities in the QS rankings

Figure 12 Breakdown of the top 100 universities in the QS rankings, 2026



Appendix II. Ranking methodologies

International rankings, while often cited together, rest on different underlying assumptions and reward different dimensions of performance. The QS World University Ranking (WUR) gives prominence to reputation surveys, which carry more than double the weight of research metrics. Its methodology therefore is oriented towards external standing and favours institutions with high global visibility and extensive professional networks. By contrast, the THE WUR is more grounded in quantitative metrics, placing greater emphasis on bibliometric indicators and less weight on reputation.

The structural design of rankings also influences how institutional performance is represented. Both QS and THE publish rankings across multiple hierarchical layers, but they organize those levels differently. The QS framework consists of three tiers: at the top sits the overall World University Ranking, which captures general institutional performance. Beneath it, separate rankings are compiled for five subject areas that group related fields into a single domain. At the lowest level, a list is produced for individual subjects, each using a modified version of the baseline methodology that reflects the characteristics of the subject concerned. This allows the lower layers to capture institutional strengths and specialization that may be obscured at the aggregate level. While THE also publishes subject rankings, these are less granular and more closely resemble the middle layer of the QS hierarchy. Consequently, the QS structure offers a more suitable pathway for institutions with a narrower profile to build recognition in selected subjects, even if they lack the scale or breadth required to break into higher tiers of the overall ranking which is most suitable for large, multidisciplinary institutions.

Table 2 Evaluation metrics in the QS and THE World University Rankings, 2026

Dimension	QS weight	THE weight
Reputation	45.0%	33.0%
Teaching		15.0%
Research	30.0%	18.0%
Employer	15.0%	0.0%
Research output & impact	20.0%	41.0%
Teaching environment	10.0%	14.5%
Internationalisation	15.0%	7.5%
Employability	5.0%	0.0%
Industry engagement	0.0%	4.0%
Sustainability	5.0%	0.0%

Source: Solutions Lab analysis

Appendix III. Leapfrogger universities: methodology

Leapfrogger universities are defined by two criteria:

Current ranking position	Magnitude of improvement since 2020
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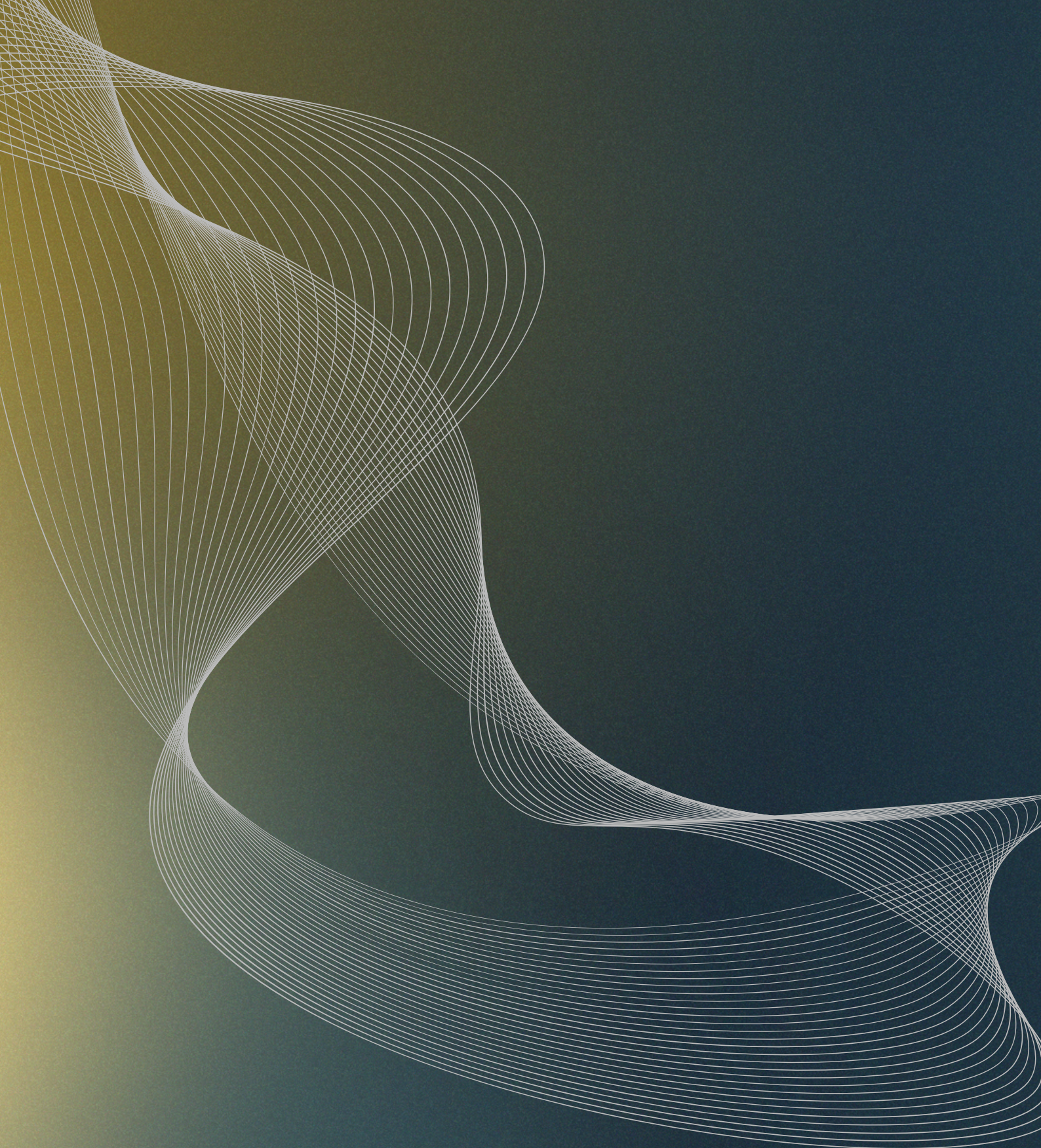
Only the combination of these two aspects makes it possible to identify institutions that show accelerated improvement. Proximity to the top group matters little for this analysis if it is not the result of recent upward movement that can be linked to specific actions. Similarly, a big jump is not automatically relevant in strategic terms, since a university starting from a low base can improve substantially without reaching a stronger position in international competition.

The structure of the rankings means that the criteria for identifying leapfroggers must differ by layer. More granular views, such as subject rankings, usually feature fewer institutions, which makes large positional shifts both more extraordinary and, when they occur, more consequential. Thresholds therefore need to be calibrated to the structure of each ranking layer:

- Overall level:** universities must have *improved by at least 75 positions* and be ranked within the *top 350*.
- Or Subject areas:** in the middle layer, where rankings are shorter, the threshold is an *improvement of at least 50 places* alongside a position in the *top 250*.
- Or Subject level:** institutions must also have *advanced by at least 50 positions* and be ranked within the *top 200*.

Table 3 | Leapfrogger criteria by ranking granularity

GRANULARITY	CURRENT POSITION	MOVEMENT
OVERALL	350th or better	75 or more places
SUBJECT AREAS	250th or better	50 or more places
SUBJECTS	200th or better	50 or more places



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