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A Sociological Analysis of the Higher Education Performance of Hong Kong in the 2026 Asia University Rankings by Times Higher Education (THE)

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ABSTRACT: With the continuing development of internationalization and digitalization, higher education institutions (HEIs) around the world have increasingly attached importance to international university rankings, as these rankings not only symbolize global visibility and institutional reputation, but also help attract international students. At the same time, higher education plays a crucial role in national sustainable development. This paper integrates and analyzes the overall landscape of the 2026 THE Asia University Rankings from a sociological perspective, while also examining the latest ranking changes and academic performance of Hong Kong's higher education institutions.

KEYWORDS: Hong Kong, THE Asia University Rankings, World University Rankings

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of higher education institutions (HEIs) in advancing sustainability is indeed critical, as they serve as key drivers in the education and development of future leaders capable of implementing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As you highlighted, the influence of HEIs goes beyond education, as they actively shape policies, technologies, values, and societal mindsets that are crucial to the efforts of global sustainability. One significant global challenge in this transformation lies in the geographic heterogeneity of SDGs implementation. Various regions face different sustainability issues, requiring HEIs to adopt localized approaches while maintaining a global outlook. This means that HEIs need to tailor their sustainability curricula, research agendas, and community engagements to their specific contexts while contributing to broader global efforts (Shih, Hsu & Chang, 2025). However, with the continuing advancement of internationalization and digitalization, higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide have placed increasing emphasis on international university rankings. These rankings not only symbolize an institution's global visibility and academic reputation but also enhance its ability to attract international students, distinguished faculty members, research funding, and international partnerships. At the same time, higher education plays a pivotal role in strengthening national competitiveness and promoting sustainable development through talent cultivation, knowledge creation, and social innovation. Consequently, since the early 1990s, international university rankings have gradually become important indicators for evaluating institutional performance and educational quality, attracting sustained attention from policymakers, university leaders, scholars, and the general public. Since U.S. News & World Report first published its annual America's Best Colleges rankings in 1983, numerous countries have established their own university ranking systems to evaluate higher education institutions from multiple dimensions, including research performance, teaching quality, internationalization, and university–industry collaboration. Among these, the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings and Asia University Rankings have become two of the most influential international benchmarking systems for assessing higher education performance. The performance of Asia's top universities has stalled for the first time in 14 years in the *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings. The release of the 2026 THE Asia University Rankings once again demonstrated the remarkable achievements of Hong Kong's higher education system. For the first time, all eight publicly funded universities in Hong Kong were ranked among the top 100 universities in Asia, marking a historic milestone in the development of Hong Kong's higher education and reflecting its long-standing commitment to academic excellence, research capacity, and international competitiveness. Notably, The University of Hong Kong (HKU) and The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) maintained their positions among Asia's top ten universities. In addition, The Education University of Hong Kong (EdUHK) and Lingnan University

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successfully entered Asia's top 100 universities, demonstrating the growing competitiveness and diversified development of Hong Kong's higher education sector. Against this background, this paper adopts a sociological perspective to examine emerging trends in higher education within the context of globalization, digitalization, and the knowledge economy. Drawing upon the 2026 THE Asia University Rankings, it analyzes the latest ranking performance and institutional characteristics of Hong Kong's higher education institutions and further explores the opportunities and challenges they face in enhancing international competitiveness, advancing higher education internationalization, and responding to the rapidly changing global higher education landscape (Jack, 2026; Lu, 2026; Shih, 2024; Wang & Shih, 2023).

2. THE HIGHER EDUCATION PERFORMANCE OF HONG KONG IN THE 2026 ASIA UNIVERSITY RANKINGS BY *TIMES HIGHER EDUCATION (THE):* A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

This paper further integrates and analyzes the overall landscape of the 2026 Times Higher Education (THE) Asia University Rankings and the 2026 THE World University Rankings from a sociological perspective, while also examining the latest ranking changes and academic performance of higher education institutions in Hong Kong. According to the 2026 THE Asia University Rankings, mainland Chinese universities continue to dominate the Asian higher education landscape, with Tsinghua University and Peking University ranked first and second in Asia, respectively. Meanwhile, Hong Kong has two universities ranked among Asia's top ten: The University of Hong Kong (HKU) placed sixth, and The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) ranked tenth. More broadly, Hong Kong's higher education sector has demonstrated stable performance and strong international competitiveness. According to THE, all previously ranked publicly funded universities in Hong Kong remained within Asia's top 50, while two newly ranked institutions entered the top 100 for the first time, underscoring the territory's sustained strengths in research quality, internationalization, and knowledge production. Notably, The Education University of Hong Kong (EdUHK) made its debut at 37th in the 2026 THE Asia University Rankings, achieving particularly strong performance in the indicators of Research Quality and International Outlook. These results suggest that Hong Kong's higher education system is gradually evolving beyond its traditional concentration on research-intensive universities toward a more diversified landscape characterized by professional education, interdisciplinary scholarship, and broader knowledge production (Lu, 2026). From a sociological perspective, these ranking outcomes reflect not only the research performance of individual institutions but also the cumulative effects of higher education policies, sustained public investment, internationalization strategies, and global academic collaboration. They further illustrate how Hong Kong has strengthened its position as a regional hub for higher education and scientific research by enhancing research excellence, expanding international networks, and fostering innovation within an increasingly competitive global higher education environment (Hazelkorn, 2015; Marginson, 2011; Mok, 2015). From a sociological perspective, university rankings are not merely quantitative indicators of educational achievement, but also concrete manifestations of the distribution of global knowledge power and academic capital. Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) theories of "cultural capital" and "symbolic capital" help explain the advantageous position of Hong Kong universities within the international higher education field. Hong Kong universities generally adopt English-medium instruction, maintain extensive international research collaboration networks, and inherit many characteristics of the British higher education tradition. These conditions enable them to accumulate significant symbolic capital within the global academic market, thereby enhancing their international rankings and academic prestige. At the same time, globalization has profoundly reshaped the competitive structure of higher education in Asia. THE rankings place considerable emphasis on indicators such as research quality, international collaboration, industry engagement, and internationalization, reflecting the transformation of contemporary universities into "globally competitive universities." As an international financial and metropolitan hub in Asia, Hong Kong possesses significant advantages in international student mobility, transnational research collaboration, and global talent attraction, allowing its universities to maintain leading positions in Asia over the long term. However, from a critical sociological perspective, global university rankings may also contribute to the marketization and performativity of higher education. Universities are often compelled to pursue publication output, citation counts, and international reputation in order to satisfy ranking criteria established by ranking organizations. Consequently, higher education increasingly becomes shaped by the logic of global capitalism and the knowledge economy. Such trends may lead universities to prioritize research performance excessively while neglecting teaching quality, humanities education, and social responsibility. Overall, the 2026 THE Asia University Rankings indicate that Hong Kong's higher education system continues to possess strong competitiveness within Asia, with its advantages primarily rooted in internationalization, research quality, and global academic networks. Nevertheless, under the growing influence of global ranking systems, Hong Kong universities also face challenges related to the marketization of higher education, intensified academic competition, and the expansion of educational inequality. Therefore, how Hong Kong's higher education institutions can balance "international competitiveness" with "social public responsibility" will remain an important issue for future observation and discussion (Altbach & Salmi, 2011; Hazelkorn, 2015; Shin & Toutkoushian, 2011; Ye & Shih, 2021).

3. DISCUSSION

3.1 The historical development of university rankings can be divided into three major stages: (1) the emergence of national university rankings in the United States in 1983; (2) the gradual recognition and expansion of ranking systems during the 1990s; and (3) the maturation and global diffusion of international university ranking systems in the 2000s.

Since global university rankings gradually emerged as an important governance instrument in global higher education in the early 2000s, they have attracted extensive scholarly and policy attention. Many scholars have critically examined university rankings and identified significant limitations in their methodologies and evaluation frameworks. For example, Marginson (2007) argued that university rankings contain methodological weaknesses and are unable to fully capture the diverse and complex educational missions of universities. Altbach (2012) further suggested that ranking systems may intensify excessive competition within higher education and widen disparities in resources and development opportunities among universities across different countries and institutional types. Similarly, Hazelkorn (2015) noted that university rankings fail to adequately reflect the fundamental nature and public mission of higher education; instead, they encourage universities to pursue ranking performance excessively while potentially neglecting teaching quality, social responsibility, and public value. Furthermore, through a comprehensive literature review, Kochetkov (2024) identified five major areas of criticism concerning global university rankings: (1)

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methodological and technical limitations; (2) narrow and reductionist performance indicators; (3) systemic biases and the Matthew effect; (4) risks to national identity and higher education diversity; and (5) conflicts of interest and commercialization. Despite these persistent criticisms, the influence of global university rankings has continued to expand due to extensive media coverage, intensifying global competition in higher education, and the rapid development of the knowledge economy. University rankings have not only significantly influenced higher education policies but have also shaped public perceptions of institutional quality and academic excellence. For universities, international rankings have become important strategic tools for enhancing global visibility, strengthening institutional reputation, and attracting outstanding domestic and international students, faculty members, researchers, and resources. For governments, university rankings have increasingly become policy indicators for assessing national higher education competitiveness and international influence. Consequently, many countries have incorporated the improvement of global university rankings into their higher education policy agendas. For instance, mainland China and Japan have identified achieving positions among the world's top 100 or top 200 universities as important policy objectives for higher education development. Taiwan has also implemented initiatives such as the "Development Plan for World-Class Universities and Research Centers" (commonly known as the "Five-Year 50 Billion Plan") and the "Higher Education Sprout Project" to cultivate internationally competitive and world-class universities. These policy initiatives implicitly reflect an orientation toward enhancing international rankings and global competitiveness (Wu, 2026; Wang, 2026).

In summary, the historical development of international university ranking systems can be traced back to the publication of the annual America's Best Colleges rankings by U.S. News & World Report in 1983. Since then, university rankings have evolved from comparative benchmarking tools used within the United States into important mechanisms for evaluating institutional performance and educational quality. During the 1990s, ranking systems gradually gained prominence as governments, higher education institutions, and the general public increasingly relied on them to assess educational quality and institutional competitiveness. The early 2000s marked a significant turning point in the evolution of global university rankings with the establishment of major international ranking systems, including the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), the QS World University Rankings (QS), and the Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE). These global ranking systems not only substantially enhanced the international influence of university rankings but also transformed their function from simple performance evaluation tools into important instruments of higher education governance, policy development, and strategic institutional management. Against the backdrop of accelerating globalization, internationalization, and digitalization, higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide have attached increasing importance to international university rankings. Such rankings are regarded not only as key indicators of institutional global visibility, academic reputation, and international competitiveness, but also as strategic instruments for attracting international students, distinguished faculty members, research funding, and transnational research collaborations. At the same time, higher education has become a major driver of national competitiveness and sustainable development through talent cultivation, knowledge production, technological innovation, and social innovation. Consequently, international university rankings have evolved into influential benchmarks for assessing institutional excellence and higher education performance, attracting sustained attention from governments, policymakers, university leaders, and the global academic community. More importantly, ranking systems have profoundly shaped higher education policies, institutional development strategies, resource allocation, and models of higher education governance, thereby redefining the developmental trajectories and international competitive strategies of universities worldwide (Wu, 2026; Wang, 2026).

3.2 Implications of Hong Kong's Strong Performance in International University Rankings for Higher Education in Taiwan

Hong Kong's strong performance in international university rankings should not be understood merely as the outcome of individual universities' efforts to enhance their global visibility and academic reputation. Rather, it should be examined in relation to the structural interaction among higher education governance, resource allocation, internationalization strategies, research capacity, and institutional conditions. From the perspective of the sociology of education, university rankings are not simply neutral instruments for measuring educational quality; they are closely associated with global competition in higher education, knowledge production, and the distribution of academic and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Marginson, 2007, 2014). From this perspective, the strong performance of Hong Kong universities in global rankings reflects not only institutional achievement but also the ways in which Hong Kong's higher education system has responded to the institutional demands of global academic competition and the knowledge economy. Accordingly, Hong Kong's experience offers important comparative insights and policy implications for neighboring higher education systems, particularly Taiwan. First, with regard to the internationalization of higher education, universities in Hong Kong have long emphasized English-medium instruction, the recruitment of international faculty, transnational research collaboration, the recruitment of international students, and the development of global academic networks. These institutional conditions have contributed to enhancing universities' international visibility and academic competitiveness and are structurally aligned, to a certain extent, with indicators emphasized by global university rankings, including internationalization, research impact, and international collaboration (Mok & Cheung, 2011; Marginson, 2014). However, the internationalization of higher education should not be reduced to increases in the proportion of international students or the number of courses taught in English. Rather, it should be understood as a comprehensive transformation involving knowledge production, curriculum development, research collaboration, talent development, and university governance (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Thus, the major lesson for Taiwan from Hong Kong's experience lies not in simply replicating Hong Kong's policies on English-medium instruction or international student recruitment, but in developing substantive internationalization strategies that organically integrate global academic engagement with research quality, talent development, and societal needs. Second, in terms of research capacity and resource allocation, the development of world-class universities is generally closely associated with high-quality academic talent, adequate resources, effective governance, and supportive academic environments (Salmi, 2009). Hong Kong's higher education system has strengthened universities' research capacity through sustained investment in research, the recruitment of international academic talent, and transnational research collaboration, thereby enabling its universities to maintain substantial visibility and competitiveness within the global knowledge-production system. The important implication for Taiwan is therefore not simply to increase expenditure on higher education, but to reconsider the strategic and differentiated allocation of resources. Taiwan has a relatively large number of higher education institutions, and universities differ considerably in their research conditions, faculty structures, institutional missions, and developmental capacities. If all universities were to pursue identical ranking indicators as their primary development goals, this could instead result in resource misallocation and institutional homogenization. A more

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appropriate approach would be to develop differentiated resource-allocation strategies based on the historical missions, academic strengths, and social functions of different types of universities, thereby creating institutional structures in which research excellence, talent development, international collaboration, and distinctive institutional profiles mutually reinforce one another (Salmi, 2009; Hazelkorn, 2015).

Furthermore, the Hong Kong case reminds Taiwan that university rankings involve significant forms of institutional and normative selection. The indicators adopted by ranking organizations—including research output, citation impact, international reputation, international collaboration, and industry engagement—are not entirely objective or value-neutral. Rather, they reflect particular conceptions and normative assumptions about what constitutes a "world-class university" in a given historical period. When governments and universities increasingly incorporate ranking outcomes into policy performance assessment and institutional governance, rankings cease to function merely as external evaluation mechanisms and may become governance instruments that shape organizational behavior and institutional strategies. From this perspective, Taiwan should avoid equating ranking indicators directly with university quality or treating ranking positions as the sole measure of institutional excellence. Of particular concern is the possibility that universities' heavy reliance on global ranking indicators may generate institutional isomorphism. In responding to similar external evaluation mechanisms, universities may gradually adopt comparable organizational structures, research strategies, and performance-management models. Under such circumstances, universities may place excessive emphasis on publication output, citation counts, and international reputation while comparatively neglecting teaching quality, local culture, community engagement, cultural preservation, and social responsibility—dimensions that are more difficult to quantify but remain essential to the educational mission of universities (Dill & Soo, 2005; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Hazelkorn, 2015). University rankings can therefore serve as useful reference points for international comparison and quality improvement, but they should not become the sole basis for defining institutional excellence or the value of higher education.

Moreover, Hong Kong's experience should not be regarded as a policy model that can be directly transplanted to Taiwan. Hong Kong possesses distinctive historical, institutional, linguistic, and urban-development conditions. Its English-language academic tradition, highly internationalized social environment, and position as a major international financial and metropolitan center in Asia constitute important institutional foundations for the international competitiveness of its higher education system (Mok, 2015; Marginson, 2016). Consequently, directly replicating Hong Kong's internationalization strategies in Taiwan would not necessarily produce equivalent policy outcomes. A more appropriate approach would be to identify the underlying institutional principles reflected in Hong Kong's experience—including strategic allocation of research resources, protection of institutional autonomy, development of international academic networks, and support for distinctive institutional missions—and then adapt these principles to Taiwan's own social, cultural, historical, and educational contexts. From the perspective of the sociology of education, the experiences of Hong Kong and Taiwan also reveal a fundamental tension between global competitiveness and the publicness of higher education. University rankings can provide a common reference point for international comparison and encourage institutions to improve research quality and global visibility. However, when rankings gradually become the primary or even exclusive objective of institutional development, higher education may increasingly be governed by the logics of marketization and performativity. Universities may become increasingly oriented toward the value standards established by global ranking organizations while neglecting the cultural contexts and public needs of the societies they serve. From the perspective of the publicness of higher education, the value of universities should not be determined solely by their positions in global rankings. It should also be assessed in terms of their contributions to knowledge as a public good, social equity, cultural development, and the public interest (Hazelkorn, 2015; Marginson, 2007, 2011). This suggests that the criteria of university excellence should not be defined exclusively by global ranking organizations; rather, different societies should retain the autonomy to interpret the purposes and values of higher education according to their own social contexts. Overall, Hong Kong's improvement in international university rankings provides Taiwan with an important comparative case for understanding the development of globally competitive higher education systems. Hong Kong's experience demonstrates that international rankings can function as policy instruments for promoting research quality, internationalization, and global academic connectivity; however, rankings themselves should not become the ultimate purpose of higher education development. If Taiwan seeks to draw lessons from Hong Kong's experience, it should pursue international competitiveness while simultaneously safeguarding institutional autonomy, educational equity, teaching quality, social responsibility, and local cultural needs, thereby developing a higher education governance model that combines global perspectives with responsiveness to local contexts (Marginson, 2016; Hazelkorn, 2015). In other words, what Taiwan should learn from Hong Kong is not simply its "ranking outcomes," but rather how its higher education system has progressively developed a globally connected and academically competitive ecosystem through institutional governance, strategic resource allocation, internationalization strategies, and research policies. More importantly, Taiwan should critically reflect on the public mission and social responsibilities of its own higher education system, ensuring that the pursuit of higher international rankings remains a means of enhancing educational quality and public value rather than becoming an end in itself that displaces the fundamental purposes and diverse missions of higher education.

3.3 University rankings do not merely evaluate universities; they also construct a particular framework for defining what constitutes a "world-class" or "excellent" university.

Education as initiation is a profound concept that suggests education transcends the mere transmission of knowledge. It emphasizes the role of education in guiding students into deeper understandings of the world, culture, values, and ways of thinking, and advancing sustainable national development for a country. Higher education plays a pivotal role in advancing sustainable national development, with its impacts and challenges intricately shaped by the political, economic, and cultural contexts of individual nations. Ranking systems such as THE, QS, and ARWU construct a dominant frame of university excellence by selecting and weighting indicators such as research quality, citation impact, internationalization, academic reputation, and industry engagement. These indicators are not value-neutral; rather, they embody particular assumptions about what forms of knowledge production, academic performance, and institutional development should be regarded as valuable. Universities, governments, and academic professionals subsequently adjust their policies, priorities, and practices in response to this dominant framework. From this perspective, university rankings can be understood not merely as measurement instruments, but also as a form of framing power. They influence how institutional excellence is defined, which dimensions of higher education are made visible, and which forms of educational contribution may

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be marginalized. Consequently, universities may increasingly align their organizational strategies with ranking criteria, thereby reinforcing particular models of institutional excellence and potentially contributing to institutional isomorphism, marketization, and performativity in higher education (Bourdieu, 1986; Chen & Shih, 2025; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Hazelkorn, 2015; Shih & Wang, 2022; Marginson, 2007a, 2007b).

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