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The Burden of Limited Nigerian University Representation in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2026: Challenges and Search for Solutions by Nigerian Researchers

Olumoyo Aderonke Esther, Ph.D¹, Oweikpodor Vera Gbaeprekumo², Ph.D, Fasosin Abioye David³, Olajumoke Adebunmi Abiyere Ph.D⁴, Adedayo Aderinsola Aminat⁵, Niyi Jacob Ogunode Ph.D⁶

1. Federal College of Education Technical Akoka Lagos. Department of Educational Foundation and Management
2. Dept: Educational Management and Foundations, Delta State University Abraka
3. Federal College of Education (Technical) Akoka, Mechanical Fabrication Technology Department
4. Ekiti State University Ado Ekiti Department of Educational Management
5. Institution: Federal College of Education (Technical) Akoka, Yaba, Lagos. Dept: Educational Foundation & Management
6. Department of Educational Management, Faculty of Education. University of Abuja, Nigeria.

* Correspondence: aderonke.olumoyo@fctakoka.edu.ng, gbakumovera@gmail.com, davidfash1986@gmail.com, olajumokeabiyere@gmail.com, adedayoaderinsola901@gmail.com, niyijacobogunode@gmail.com

Abstract: The limited representation of Nigerian universities in the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings 2026 has become a matter of concern and intellectual burden for many young Nigerian researchers. Out of more than 200 public and private universities in Nigeria, only 24 were captured in the published THE 2026 ranking. Young researchers view this situation not simply as a disappointing ranking outcome but as a challenge that requires serious investigation and practical solutions. The concern is centred on why a country with a large university system, thousands of academics and a growing research community continues to have relatively limited representation in one of the world's major university ranking systems. This paper examines the burden from the perspectives of research productivity, research quality, research funding, international collaboration, research visibility, institutional data management, postgraduate research capacity and university–industry linkages. The paper argues that the situation should not be used to label the unranked universities as poor institutions because THE applies specific eligibility requirements and indicators that favour research-intensive and internationally visible universities. Instead, the result should serve as a wake-up call for Nigerian universities, government, university managers and researchers. The paper proposes practical solutions including stronger research financing, mentorship of young researchers, improved research infrastructure, international collaboration, institutional research offices, better digital visibility, stronger postgraduate research programmes and closer university–industry partnerships. The paper concludes that young Nigerian researchers should see the 2026 ranking outcome as a research and institutional development challenge to be solved collectively, rather than merely as a ranking deficit.

Keywords: young researchers, Nigerian universities, Times Higher Education, university ranking, research productivity, research visibility, internationalisation.

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1. Introduction

The rapid growth of the Nigerian university system is one of the major developments in the country's tertiary education sector. Nigeria now has more than 200 universities across federal, state and private ownership. This expansion has provided greater opportunities for university education and has created a large community of lecturers,

researchers and postgraduate students. However, the growing number of universities has also created an important question for a new generation of Nigerian scholars: Why has the growth in the number of universities not produced a corresponding increase in the number of Nigerian universities visible in major international university rankings?

This question has become a particular burden for Nigerian researchers following the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2026. Only 24 Nigerian universities were captured in the published THE 2026 Nigeria ranking. THE, however, does not rank every university simply because it exists or is officially recognised. Its methodology is based substantially on research performance, research environment, research quality, teaching, international outlook and industry engagement. It also has specific eligibility requirements, including a substantial volume of internationally indexed research publications [1].

The concern should not be interpreted as an attack on Nigerian universities. Rather, it should be understood as an expression of intellectual responsibility among young researchers who want to see Nigerian higher education become more visible and competitive internationally. Their concern is essentially solution-oriented. They are not merely asking, "Why are we not ranked?" They are asking, "What must Nigerian universities do differently to increase their capacity to participate successfully in global knowledge production?"

This distinction is important because international ranking should not be regarded as the only measure of university quality. A university may contribute significantly to local communities, produce competent graduates and conduct socially relevant research without appearing prominently in THE. Nevertheless, rankings provide useful information about particular dimensions of institutional performance, especially research productivity, research quality and international visibility. THE's 2026 methodology allocates 29% to research environment and 30% to research quality, making research a central component of its assessment [2].

The concern becomes more significant for researchers because they are entering an academic environment in which international visibility is increasingly important. Early-career academics are expected to publish internationally, obtain research grants, attract citations, participate in conferences, collaborate with foreign scholars and contribute to internationally recognised research networks. Yet many academics work in institutions where research support systems, funding, laboratory facilities, postgraduate resources and international partnerships remain limited. The responsibility placed on the individual researcher can therefore become disproportionate to the resources available [3].

Research funding is particularly important issue of concern. Internationally competitive research requires financial resources for fieldwork, laboratory analysis, research assistants, data collection, software, scholarly databases, conferences and publication. The World Bank has identified weaknesses in Nigeria's science, technology and innovation ecosystem, including constraints related to research infrastructure and international collaboration. TETFund has also recognised significant infrastructure and research-capacity gaps within Nigerian tertiary institutions. Another concerns is the issue of research visibility. Nigerian researchers may publish substantial numbers of papers, but not all publications are indexed in the international databases used by major ranking systems. Similarly, universities may not have adequate institutional repositories or systems for documenting their research outputs. Research can therefore exist without achieving corresponding international visibility. Evidence from Nigerian universities has identified weaknesses in institutional repository development and its implications for institutional visibility [4].

Researchers also face the challenge of building international research networks. THE gives 7.5% of its overall methodology to international outlook, including international research collaboration. International partnerships can provide access to research expertise,

equipment, grants, advanced methodologies and high-impact publication networks [5]. Consequently, the limited internationalisation of research in some Nigerian universities is not merely a ranking problem; it is a broader research-development problem. The burden therefore requires a collective response. Young researchers should not carry it alone. University administrators, senior academics, government agencies, TETFund, research councils, professional associations and private-sector organisations all have roles to play. The objective should be to create an academic environment in which young researchers can produce high-quality research without being constrained by inadequate institutional support [6].

For Nigerian researchers, therefore, the 24-university representation has become more than a statistical figure. It represents a concern of questions. They want to know why many Nigerian universities that have professors, lecturers, students, postgraduate programmes, libraries, laboratories and research publications are not sufficiently visible in major global ranking systems. So, the aimed of this paper is to examine factors responsible for poor representation of Nigerian universities in global ranking of THE 2026-2027 [7].

2. Methodology

Objectives of the study

1) to examine factors responsible for poor representation of Nigerian universities in global ranking of THE 2026-2027.;

2) to make implementable suggestions that will enhance performance of the Nigerian universities in future ranking.

2.0 Conceptual Terms

Concern of THE ranking

3.0 Why Only 24 Nigerian Universities Were Captured in the THE World University Rankings 2026: A Critical Analysis

The appearance of 24 Nigerian universities in the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings 2026 deserves careful academic interpretation. It should not be understood simply as meaning that only 24 Nigerian universities are “good universities.” Rather, THE is a research-intensive global ranking with specific eligibility requirements and performance indicators. In the 2026 edition, THE listed 24 Nigerian universities, compared with 21 in each of the 2024 and 2025 editions. Nigeria nevertheless had the largest number of represented universities among Sub-Saharan African countries.

The critical issue, therefore, is why Nigeria, with its large and expanding university system, had only 24 institutions captured. THE's methodology provides an important part of the answer. An institution may be excluded if it does not teach undergraduates, has fewer than 1,000 relevant publications during 2020–2024, with at least 100 publications in each year, or has 80% or more of its research output concentrated in one of THE's 11 subject areas. THE also depends on institutional data submissions and internationally indexed research information. From the perspective of tertiary education scholarship, the limited representation can be discussed through seven interconnected factors.

Low volume and consistency of internationally indexed research publications

The relatively low level of research output from many Nigerian universities in internationally indexed journals. This is particularly important because THE uses Scopus-indexed publications in measuring research productivity. Its 2026 methodology considers publications from 2020–2024 and requires eligible universities to have at least 1,000 relevant publications over the period, with a minimum of 100 in a year. This requirement creates a substantial barrier for relatively young universities and institutions whose research systems are still developing. A university may have hundreds of lecturers and

produce many academic papers, but if a substantial proportion of those publications are in journals not indexed in Scopus, they may contribute little or nothing to the THE research-productivity component. Ogunode observes that many Nigerian researchers continue to publish in local journals with limited international visibility, while inadequate awareness of international indexing requirements, publication costs, weak mentoring and limited institutional research support constrain participation in Scopus-indexed publishing. This is an important distinction: academic publication is not the same thing as internationally visible publication. Many Nigerian universities produce research, but THE measures a particular form of internationally indexed research production. Consequently, universities with inadequate publication volume or inconsistent annual output may fail to meet THE's eligibility threshold.

Inadequate research funding and dependence on individual researchers

Inadequate and uneven research financing. International university rankings are strongly connected with the capacity of universities to sustain research programmes, laboratories, postgraduate education, conferences, research assistants, data collection and publication. THE allocates 29% of its overall methodology to the research environment, including research reputation, research income and research productivity, while another 30% is allocated to research quality. Empirical evidence from Nigerian tertiary institutions supports this concern. A study of research funding in Nigerian tertiary institutions found that only a small proportion of academic staff had received research grants and that many researchers financed their research personally from limited salaries. The study identified TETFund as the most significant source of research grants among the respondents. The World Bank similarly reported that Nigeria's research and innovation system has historically operated with very low R&D expenditure, estimated in its assessment at about 0.13%, and identified weak research infrastructure and limited international collaboration as systemic constraints. More recently, TETFund itself reported that its 2024 national survey of research infrastructure in public tertiary institutions identified outdated facilities, underutilised and duplicated equipment, inadequate collaboration across faculties and significant infrastructure gaps. Thus, the limited THE representation should partly be understood as a research-capacity problem rather than merely a ranking problem. Where universities lack stable research financing and modern research infrastructure, sustained high-volume and high-impact international research becomes difficult.

Weak research quality and citation impact

The quality, influence and citation of research. Publication quantity alone does not guarantee a strong position in THE. Research quality constitutes the largest individual pillar in the 2026 methodology, accounting for 30% of the overall ranking. It includes citation impact, research strength, research excellence and research influence. THE's bibliometric analysis for the 2026 ranking drew on 174.9 million citations to 18.7 million publications indexed by Elsevier's Scopus database. For Nigerian universities, this means that producing papers is only one part of the challenge. Research must also be read, cited, used and recognised internationally. A university can therefore have a considerable number of publications but still perform modestly if its research receives limited international citation or does not demonstrate strong field-weighted research impact. The empirical implication is important for Nigerian university management. Greater emphasis needs to move from a "publish more" culture to a "publish useful, rigorous, visible and influential research" culture. Research addressing internationally significant scientific, technological, health, environmental, economic and educational questions is more likely to attract international scholarly attention. This is consistent with THE's emphasis on citation impact and research strength rather than publication numbers alone.

Limited international research collaboration and internationalisation

The relatively limited internationalisation of research in many Nigerian universities. THE gives 7.5% of its overall methodology to international outlook, including international students, international staff and international research collaboration. International collaboration matters because it can increase access to research facilities, international networks, advanced methodologies, joint grants and high-impact journals. The World Bank has specifically identified Nigeria's relatively small level of international research collaboration as a weakness in the national innovation system compared with some other countries. The broader empirical literature also supports the relationship between international connections and research performance. A large-scale study using more than eight million young scientists found that researchers with greater indirect international collaboration ties achieved significantly greater research productivity and prominence. Another recent study found that international mobility positively influences researchers' collaboration and research output, partly by expanding collaboration networks. For Nigeria, the implication is that universities need to move beyond occasional foreign conferences and develop sustained institutional partnerships, joint research projects, co-authored publications, visiting-scholar arrangements, international doctoral networks and externally funded collaborative research.

Weak institutional research-data management and visibility

A university may be doing research without adequately documenting and making that research visible to international ranking systems. THE requires universities to provide and sign off institutional data for ranking purposes. Where appropriate data are missing, THE may estimate some values, but institutions do not gain an advantage from withholding information. Research visibility also depends on institutional repositories, university websites, research profiles, ORCID integration, accurate author affiliations, digital libraries and systematic bibliographic management. A 2024 study of 23 universities in South-East Nigeria found that only 26% had fully implemented institutional repositories, demonstrating the uneven development of institutional research-visibility infrastructure. The researchers specifically examined the implications of these weaknesses for university visibility and ranking. This suggests that some Nigerian universities may have hidden research capacity: research exists, but institutional systems for organising, indexing, showcasing and connecting it to global scholarly databases remain inadequate. Consequently, ranking participation should be treated partly as an institutional information-management responsibility.

3. Results

Weak industry linkages and commercialisation of university knowledge

The limited connection between university research and industry. THE allocates 4% to the industry pillar, measuring areas including industry income and patents. Although this is smaller than the research pillars, it remains part of the overall institutional assessment. The challenge for many Nigerian universities is that considerable academic research does not necessarily translate into patents, industry-funded research, consultancy, technology transfer, licensing or commercial innovation. TETFund's leadership has recently emphasised that research infrastructure and the commercialisation of innovative research are essential for transforming Nigeria into a productive and competitive economy [8]. This indicates the need for a stronger university–industry–government relationship. Universities should not only produce theses and journal articles; they should also develop research that generates technologies, policy solutions, patents, products, consultancy services and industrial applications. Stronger knowledge transfer would improve the relevance of Nigerian universities and could strengthen the industry dimension of international rankings [9].

Rapid expansion of Nigerian universities without equivalent research capacity

The rapid expansion of the Nigerian university system. Nigeria has established a very large number of universities, including federal, state and private institutions. However, institutional expansion has not always been accompanied by equivalent development of research infrastructure, doctoral programmes, research-active academic staff, international partnerships and postgraduate research capacity[10]. This concern has become sufficiently significant that, in 2025–2026, the Federal Government imposed restrictions on the establishment of new universities. In an interview with THE in May 2026, Nigeria's Minister of Education argued that the country had "overbuilt" universities and that many existing institutions had significantly reduced utilisation. From the perspective of university development, the implication is straightforward: increasing the number of universities does not automatically increase the number of globally research-competitive universities. A young university may require many years to develop a mature postgraduate system, research laboratories, research reputation, doctoral supervision capacity, international partnerships and a sufficiently large Scopus-indexed publication base. This helps explain why a country can have many universities but relatively few institutions satisfying THE's research-intensive eligibility requirements [11].

4. Discussion

1) Nigerian universities should develop a deliberate research-development strategy. Research should no longer be treated as an individual responsibility of lecturers alone. Each university should identify its major research strengths, establish research clusters and provide institutional support for researchers [12].

2) Young researchers should receive dedicated research grants. Competitive grants specifically designed for early-career academics can enable young scholars to undertake quality research, publish internationally and develop independent research profiles.

3) Universities should strengthen research mentorship. Experienced professors should systematically mentor young researchers in research methodology, grant writing, academic publishing, international collaboration and research visibility. Young researchers should not be expected to learn the international research system entirely through trial and error.

4) Research infrastructure should be improved. Modern laboratories, digital libraries, statistical software, research databases, institutional repositories and reliable internet access are essential for internationally competitive research [13].

5) Universities should establish international research partnerships. Instead of relying mainly on individual contacts, institutions should establish formal partnerships for joint research, co-authorship, doctoral training, visiting scholars and international grants.

6) Universities should establish functional research and ranking units. Such units can monitor institutional publications, citations, affiliations, research income, international collaboration and ranking requirements. This would prevent valuable research outputs from becoming invisible because of poor institutional data management [14].

7) Research quality should be prioritised over publication quantity. Young researchers should be encouraged to address significant problems, use rigorous methodologies and publish in credible journals. The goal should be research that contributes to knowledge, policy and practice rather than simply increasing publication counts.

8) Postgraduate research should receive greater institutional attention. Strong doctoral programmes provide the human resources required for sustainable research. Universities should support postgraduate students through research grants, supervision, laboratories, seminars and access to scholarly databases [15].

9) University–industry partnerships should be expanded. Research should increasingly generate patents, technologies, consultancy, innovations and practical solutions. This can strengthen both the relevance of Nigerian universities and their engagement with industry.

10) The government should strengthen existing universities rather than focusing primarily on creating new ones. The central issue should be the quality and research capacity of existing institutions. Building fewer but stronger research-intensive institutions can provide a more sustainable foundation for global competitiveness [16].

5. Conclusion

The 24 Nigerian universities captured in THE World University Rankings 2026 should therefore not be interpreted as a simple count of "good" versus "bad" universities. It is more accurately understood as the number of Nigerian institutions that satisfied THE's particular eligibility and measurement framework sufficiently to appear in its published 2026 ranking. THE itself makes clear that the ranking is designed around research-intensive universities and evaluates teaching, research environment, research quality, international outlook and industry.

The seven factors discussed—limited internationally indexed publication volume, inadequate research funding, weak research quality and citation impact, limited international collaboration, poor institutional research-data management, weak university–industry linkages, and rapid institutional expansion without equivalent research capacity—are interconnected. They reinforce one another. Weak funding can produce weak infrastructure; weak infrastructure can reduce research productivity; low productivity can reduce international visibility; limited visibility can reduce collaboration; and weak collaboration can further restrict access to international research funding and networks.

There is nevertheless an important positive dimension. Nigeria's representation increased from 21 universities in the 2024 and 2025 THE rankings to 24 in 2026, and Nigeria had the largest national representation in Sub-Saharan Africa in the 2026 THE ranking. The task for Nigerian tertiary education policy should therefore not be merely to increase the number of universities appearing in rankings. The more fundamental objective should be to build research-intensive, internationally connected, adequately funded, digitally visible and socially productive universities. In this regard, the 2026 THE result can serve as a diagnostic instrument for Nigerian higher education: it identifies areas where the university system needs deeper investment in research capacity, internationalisation, data management, postgraduate education, infrastructure, innovation and knowledge transfer.

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