



# Measuring Global Engagement in Higher Education: A Case Study of UNLV and the Johnson Ranking of Global Engagement (JRGE)

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**Abstract-** As universities worldwide expand their international missions, there remains a persistent gap in how global engagement is conceptualized, measured, and assessed across institutional contexts. This paper presents a case study of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) using the Johnson Ranking of Global Engagement (JRGE), an applied globalization scorecard designed to systematically evaluate institutional global engagement across academic, research, partnership, and operational domains. Grounded in social science frameworks related to globalization, organizational behavior, and comparative education, the JRGE moves beyond reputational and output-only rankings by emphasizing evidence-based indicators and institutional self-assessment. Using a mixed-methods analysis that integrates institutional research records, curriculum profiles, partnership agreements, and administrative audits, this study examines how UNLV's global activities align with strategic goals. Findings reveal concentrated strengths in student mobility and formal partnership frameworks alongside critical data tracking gaps and institutional silos within research globalization and infrastructure governance. The paper argues that adaptable frameworks like the JRGE enable culturally diverse universities to make data-informed decisions, enhance accountability, and foster equitable global partnerships. This paper represents the final report of the initial evaluation of UNLV's global engagement and interaction.

**Keywords:** Globalization, Internationalization, Ranking, Higher Education, Evaluation.

## I. Introduction

Global engagement has become a central priority for higher education institutions, yet universities continue to face persistent challenges in defining, measuring, and managing their international activity. Conventional indicators—such as international student enrollment, counts of formal agreements, and study abroad participation rates—provide visible evidence of global presence, but offer limited insight into how engagement is distributed, coordinated, or sustained across complex institutional systems. Effective internationalization requires a comprehensive, *whole-of-university* approach that integrates disparate administrative and academic divisions. However, existing evaluative mechanisms, most notably global university ranking systems, privilege external institutional reputation and aggregate research outputs. This emphasis offers minimal utility for understanding internal operational dynamics or identifying structural inefficiencies. Consequently, universities invest substantial resources in global initiatives while remaining unable to systematically determine where cross-border activities are occurring, where they are structurally constrained, and how they align with long-term institutional strategy. “A hybrid evaluation architecture balancing national inclusivity priorities with globally recognized benchmarking indicators would allow [ranking frameworks] to evolve from domestic comparative tool[s] into a globally interoperable institutional assessment framework capable of supporting both national policy objectives and international academic positioning” (Kalita, *et al.* 2026). What this means is that there exists a need in the university evaluation universe to have an assessment architecture that moves away from rankings and reputation into global cross-border academic engagement, collaboration and influence.

This challenge is fundamentally organizational and structural. Global engagement within contemporary research universities is typically distributed across semi-autonomous units, including academic departments, international programs, research administration offices, and student affairs divisions. While this institutional dispersion enables localized specialization, it frequently produces fragmentation, creating a significant disconnect between localized practice and centralized data documentation. “The first thing that is required is that all involved with international higher education explicitly recognize that realities have changed and that current, and likely, future developments are beyond the control of the academic community. These new realities will have significant implications for higher education in general and for internationalization specifically” (Altbach & de Wit, 2023). This study addresses this problem by examining how institutions can systematically diagnose, interpret, and govern distributed global activities within decentralized higher education environments. The central research question asks: How can a multidimensional, indicator-based diagnostic framework render distributed global activity visible and actionable within a single public research institution?

To address this question, this study applies the Johnson Ranking of Global Engagement (JRGE) to the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). The JRGE is designed not as an external competitive ranking, but as



an internal diagnostic tool built from institutional data points to evaluate systemic internationalization maturity. The empirical application of the JRGE framework at UNLV yielded an overall composite score of 54 out of 100, positioning the institution within the "Established but Uneven" tier of internationalization maturity. This performance profile indicates that while core student mobility metrics and localized administrative structures are highly mature, significant variances emerge across academic tracking systems and decentralized governance components.

Over the past half-century, internationalization within higher education has transitioned from a collection of marginal, *ad hoc* activities into a central, comprehensive strategic priority for universities and governments worldwide (de Wit, 2023). Driven by diverse institutional rationales and a complex web of internal and external stakeholders, this evolution has resulted in a wide array of localized approaches to global engagement. As institutions navigate these multifaceted processes, the ability to systematically evaluate and measure internationalization efforts becomes paramount. To address this need, this study evaluates the global engagement maturity metrics of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). Utilizing a comprehensive 20-indicator evaluation rubric alongside qualitative inquiry, internal administrative data, and the *UNLV Global 2024–2025 Annual Report*, this paper analyzes how a large public research university operationalizes global strategies. In doing so, it provides a scalable framework for assessing institutional readiness and strategic alignment within the modern landscape of higher education internationalization.

This study contributes to the discipline of comparative and international higher education in three distinct ways: First, it reconceptualizes global engagement as a distributed institutional property rather than a singular, linear outcome. Second, it establishes that structural data gaps are analytically meaningful signals that diagnose institutional silos and unmet administrative capacity. Third, it positions internal diagnostic scorecards as vital governance mechanisms that enable higher education leaders to transition from anecdotal, prestige-driven tracking toward evidence-based, strategically aligned global operations.

## II. Literature Review and Study Site

### 2.1 Theoretical Dimensions of Internationalization

The scholarly literature surrounding internationalization in higher education highlights a historical transition from values-driven cooperative exchange models toward strategically managed, market-oriented operations. "Global university rankings have evolved from being a transparency and accountability instrument to a key influencer of individual, institutional, government, policy, investor and public opinion, behavior and decision-making; Their emergence beginning in 2003 with the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) corresponded with and responded to a period of accelerating transnational trade and capital flows, and student and professional mobility" (Hazelkorn, 2023). Contemporary higher education institutions engage globally through a diverse array of mechanisms, including student and staff mobility, internationalized curricula, cross-border research collaborations, and formal institutional partnerships. "For the immediate future, it is likely that there will continue to be a number of entities driving international development education activities, from a plethora of potential funders (e.g., country governments, national and multi-national aid agencies, international organizations, multi-national corporations, etc.)" (Weidman, 2022). However, scholars caution that when internationalization is treated as a generic catch-all term for any activity involving foreign entities, it loses analytical utility and becomes difficult to rigorously operationalize, measure, or govern. "Trumpism, Brexit, and the rise of nationalist and anti-immigrant politics in Europe are changing the landscape of global higher education. We are seeing a fundamental shift in higher education internationalization that will mean rethinking the entire international project of universities worldwide" (Altbach & de Wit, 2023). Consequently, as these geopolitical shifts redefine global operations, institutions require highly adaptable, internal diagnostic frameworks rather than relying solely on static historical models of engagement.

Furthermore, existing institutional evaluation mechanisms remain heavily dependent on major global ranking systems. "Current major and global university ranking models include the Shanghai Jiao Tong University's (2003) Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings (powered by Thompson Reuters, 2010), QS World University Rankings (2010), and the European Commission's U-Multirank (2010). The global ranking of universities by the QS World University Rankings 2012–2013, the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2012–2013, and Shanghai Jiao Tong University's 2011 Academic Ranking of World Universities dominate higher education drive for excellence and quality in education" (Zajda & Jacob, 2022). These external rankings utilize narrow, output-centric criteria that primarily favor well-resourced institutions, functioning as a zero-sum game that offers minimal diagnostic value for internal institutional self-assessment. Comprehensive evaluation requires a shift away from reputational comparison toward metrics that capture the internationalization process, its localized impacts, and the explicit degree of cross-domain integration within a single university ecosystem.

The intersection of globalization and educational governance has catalyzed an unprecedented shift toward standardized academic achievements, skills, and institutional outcomes (Zajda & Jacob, 2022). While



globalization remains a ubiquitous yet poorly understood driver of modern structural changes, it directly dictates the strategic agendas of contemporary higher education systems. Subsequently, trends in educational policy indicate that systemic reforms have transitioned into accountability-, performance-, and output-driven frameworks (Zajda & Jacob, 2022). As local and national educational systems expand their monitoring of institutional outcomes to meet these global demands, the evaluation of internationalization increasingly requires structured, comprehensive assessment metrics rather than isolated, *ad hoc* observations.

### **2.2 Institutional Setting: The University of Nevada, Las Vegas**

As higher education institutions expand, they evolve into increasingly complex organizations facing distinct management challenges across governance, academic delivery, and data infrastructure. This structural reality is highly evident at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), a large, public, urban research university designated as a minority-serving institution (MSI). UNLV has experienced rapid institutional growth and has increasingly prioritized global engagement within its broader strategic frameworks.

The university has recently undertaken efforts to centralize multiple global engagement functions under a unified institutional structure. Despite this administrative consolidation, internationalization activities remain operationally distributed across autonomous academic colleges, sponsored programs/divisions, and student support services. This structural configuration creates an ideal environment for investigating the "*lived-measured disjuncture*"—a condition in which extensive local institutional activity exceeds the structural capacity of centralized data systems to document, aggregate, and report it.

## **III. Materials and Methods**

### **3.1 Framework Architecture and Indicators**

The JRGE framework is operationalized as a multidimensional matrix consisting of four primary structural domains: Social and Cultural; Internal Business and Economic; Academic and Teaching/Learning; and Governance: Leadership and Administration. Each domain contains five specific indicators, yielding 20 distinct evaluative touchpoints across the entire institution. A central feature of the framework is the deliberate placement of the indicator measuring "International Students, Faculty and Staff" across all four domains. This indicator serves as a cross-cutting anchor to trace how human capital directly intersects with institutional infrastructure, business models, academic output, and campus environment.

### **3.2 Scoring Mechanics and Rationales**

The framework utilizes a dual-layered evaluation mechanism incorporating a quantitative rubric score and a qualitative rationale validation for each indicator. The quantitative dimension evaluates data maturity and implementation using a 0–5 scale:

- **0:** No Evidence (complete absence of data or operational activity)
- **1:** Emerging Status (isolated, ad-hoc activities without coordination)
- **2:** Early Development (initial data tracking or programmatic baseline established)
- **3:** Established but Uneven (functional frameworks present but inconsistent across units)
- **4:** Strong, Integrated System (centralized data mechanisms and active coordination)
- **5:** Transformative, Equity-Centered Operation (optimized institutional system)

Concurrently, evaluators audit each indicator against four distinct qualitative organizational rationales to document institutional mechanics:

- **Activity:** Assessing documented programs or active operational practices.
- **Ethos:** Verifying explicit institutional commitment and equity orientation.
- **Competency:** Measuring demonstrated capability and operational effectiveness.
- **Process:** Evaluating implementation, assessment coordination, and continuous improvement mechanisms.

### **3.3 Data Collection and Analytic Strategy**

Empirical data were systematically collected from diverse administrative and operational nodes across the institution, including the office of institutional research, global engagement units, sponsored programs, research administration records, university library citation databases, and student affairs enrollment management systems. This decentralized data collection strategy intentionally mirrored the structural configuration of the university itself.

The analytic strategy proceeded in three sequential stages: First, *data mapping* organized institutional records according to the four-domain matrix to pinpoint where global activities are formally documented. Second, *pattern identification* analyzed the collective indicators to isolate areas of concentration (complete data), absence (missing data), and fragmentation (activity without centralized coordination). Third, *interpretive*



*diagnosis* evaluated these patterns against institutional strategic priorities. Critically, areas of missing or incomplete data were treated as analytically meaningful signals rather than methodological errors. Data absence was interpreted as a structural indicator diagnosing decentralized operations, a lack of centralized reporting systems, or unmet strategic prioritization.

#### IV. Results and Discussion

##### 4.1 Integrated Domain Analysis and Empirical Matrix

Application of the JRGE framework to UNLV generated a final composite score of 54 out of 100, placing the institution within the "Established but Uneven" performance tier. The complete distribution of indicator scores, domain subtotals, and corresponding strategic signals is detailed in Table 1.

**Table 1.** JRGE Empirical Diagnostic Matrix for UNLV Institutional Application

JRGE Domain	Evaluated Indicator	Score (0–5)	Domain Subtotal	Institutional Performance Tier	Diagnostic Status & Actionable Signal
Social and Cultural	1. International Students, Faculty & Staff	4			
Social and Cultural	2. Global Consciousness	3			
Social and Cultural	3. Global Programs/Activities	4			
Social and Cultural	4. Inter-culturation Integration	3			
Social and Cultural	5. Student Exchange/Study Abroad	4	18 / 25	Established	High reporting maturity and structured documentation; activity operates independently of central strategic planning.
Internal Business & Economic	1. International Students, Faculty & Staff	4			
Internal Business & Economic	2. Brand Image/Recognition	3			
Internal Business & Economic	3. International Partnerships	2			
Internal Business & Economic	4. Funding/Fundraising for Global Activities	2			
Internal Business & Economic	5. Joint Ventures/Degree Programs	1	12 / 25	Emerging	Static MOU documentation is robust, but lacks continuous operational tracking or active Top Tier 2.0 evaluation.



Academic & Teaching/Learning	1. International Students, Faculty & Staff	4			
Academic & Teaching/Learning	2. International Research Collaboration	2			
Academic & Teaching/Learning	3. Worldwide Publications/Citations	2			
Academic & Teaching/Learning	4. Academic Cross-Border Engagement	2			
Academic & Teaching/Learning	5. Visiting Scholars/Faculty-Staff Mobility	1	11 / 25	Emerging	Significant distributed activity exists across units; requires a centralized mechanism to synthesize system visibility.
Governance: Leadership & Admin	1. International Students, Faculty & Staff	4			
Governance: Leadership & Admin	2. Administrative Support/Involvement	3			
Governance: Leadership & Admin	3. International Offices	3			
Governance: Leadership & Admin	4. Closely-Coupled Systems	1			
Governance: Leadership & Admin	5. Awards/International Recognition	2	13 / 25	Emerging	Centralized leadership structure is established, but deeply entrenched data silos across administrative nodes persist.
<b>MATRIX CONCLUSION</b>	<b>COMPOSITE JRGE SCORE</b>		<b>54 / 100</b>	<b>Established but Uneven</b>	<b>Final Institutional Performance Tier Evaluation Summary</b>

*Note: Scores compiled using the JRGE Digital Evaluation Tool based on UNLV internal institutional data, qualitative inquiry and division reports.*

As shown in Table 1, the empirical results unveil a highly asymmetrical distribution of internationalization maturity across the university system. The **Social and Cultural** domain achieved the highest level of maturity with a subtotal of 18 out of 25, indicating an "Established" tier. This performance is anchored by robust international student populations (1,034 enrolled students) and active visiting scholar participation representing approximately 30 countries. Lived interaction and student mobility function as the primary engines of campus globalization; however, these activities operate largely independently of centralized institutional strategic planning.



The **Internal Business and Economic** domain registered within the "Emerging" tier with a subtotal of 12 out of 25. The analysis shows that while formal partnership frameworks are structurally abundant—encompassing 57 active Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) across Asia, Latin America, and Europe—these relationships are predominantly maintained as static documents. To address this structural gap, the institution has initiated the implementation of new evaluation procedures designed to align agreements with strategic priorities through mid-agreement check-ins and active activity reporting. This transitional phase reflects a critical shift from mere partnership expansion toward proactive partnership management.

#### **4.2 Reconciling Data Silos in Research and Governance**

The **Academic and Teaching/Learning** domain produced a subtotal of 11 out of 25, designating it within the "Emerging" performance tier. Importantly, this score does not signify an absence of global research activity or an institutional failure. Instead, it diagnoses a critical tracking limitation within the university's data infrastructure.

Highly sophisticated capabilities to monitor international co-authorship, cross-border grant collaborations, and global knowledge networks reside natively within the Division of Research and Sponsored Programs, individual academic colleges, and University Libraries. However, these metrics have historically remained unaggregated and decentralized. This fragmentation produces an artificial disjuncture between the extensive international research produced by individual faculty members and its collective visibility on centralized institutional reporting platforms, highlighting a clear opportunity for centralized global structures to serve as a synthesizing collaborative hub.

The **Governance: Leadership and Administration** domain recorded a subtotal of 13 out of 25, representing an "Emerging" status. While centralized administrative leadership structures have been successfully established within the past two years, data systems remain loosely coupled. What remains unmeasured across administrative units often remains uncoordinated, validating the principle that data infrastructure does not merely reflect institutional reality—it actively governs it. Transitioning from loosely coupled operational silos toward closely coupled data systems is essential to ensure that international strategic initiatives are supported by integrated, real-time operational metrics.

### **V. Conclusion – The Global Imperative of Higher Education**

The application of the JRGE framework demonstrates that global engagement cannot be defined solely by superficial, aggregate indicators of global presence. Instead, internationalization must be understood as a systemic, distributed institutional property whose effectiveness depends entirely on the coordination, visibility, and integration of its underlying data structures. Beyond student mobility metrics, internationalization fundamentally shapes internal university operations. For instance, shifts in British academic recruitment and retention trends have structurally altered the global reach of institutional employment models and organizational designs (Bekhradnia & Sastry, 2005, as cited in Turner & Robson, 2007). The diagnostic assessment at UNLV reveals an institution that is asymmetrically global—exhibiting robust maturity in student mobility and formal partnership networks, alongside localized tracking silos within research globalization and administrative data infrastructure.

Ultimately, modern higher education operates within an interconnected matrix where global, national, and local dynamics intersect (Abd Aziz & Abdullah, 2014; Marginson, 2011). This globalized landscape is continuously reshaped by the transnational movement of talent and academic programs (Knight, 2006), the heavy reliance on institutional rankings for marketing and decision-making (Locke, 2011), and the integration of advanced technological platforms (Clarke, 2013). As a critical driver of macroeconomic health, the higher education sector remains foundational to national competitiveness on the global stage (Abd Aziz & Abdullah, 2014; Schwab et al., 2013). While scholarly definitions and practical operationalizations of internationalization vary across the literature (Altbach, 2007; Healey, 2008; Hudzik, 2011; Knight, 2007; Mok, 2007; Rui Yang, 2001), it is digitally and strategically integrated as a permanent fixture of university development (Abd Aziz & Abdullah, 2014; International Association of Universities, 2012). For institutions like the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), navigating this permanent reality requires moving past fragmented initiatives toward the comprehensive, data-driven frameworks analyzed in this study.

This study positions the JRGE as an adaptable, internally oriented diagnostic framework that shifts higher education evaluation away from zero-sum, prestige-driven external rankings toward institutional learning and capacity building. The iterative development of centralized assessment protocols at UNLV indicates that bridging the lived-measured disjuncture is an achievable process. Ultimately, the future of internationalization will depend not on the uncoordinated accumulation of global activities, but on the systematic capacity of universities to measure, interpret, and govern those activities within a coherent institutional framework. By providing a structured evaluation mechanism, this model allows institutions to strategically balance the overlapping economic, academic, political, and cultural rationales—ranging from revenue generation and



prestige acquisition to diplomatic investment and cross-cultural understanding—that serve as the foundational structural incentives for modern global engagement (Graf, 2008).

## VI. Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was not required for this study as it did not involve human participants or animal subjects, and relied exclusively on the analysis of aggregate institutional metrics and administrative data.

## VII. Data Availability

### Data Availability Statement

The institutional metrics, enrollment trends, and global partnership data supporting the findings of this study are sourced from internal university administrative records, localized qualitative inquiry, and the `_2024-2025 UNLV Global Annual Report.docx_Redacted (3)_Redacted.pdf`.

### Underlying and Extended Data

The qualitative inquiry notes, maturity score tracking sheets (UNLV\_JRGE\_Raw\_Maturity\_Scores.xlsx), and evaluation rubrics (JRGE\_20\_Indicator\_Evaluation\_Rubric.docx) generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly deposited in an external repository due to the localized and administrative nature of the institutional data. The evaluative frameworks and de-identified data matrices are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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