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**CONTACTS**

Phone: **+998 50 737 87 88**

Website: <https://ist-journal.uz>

Email: [innovationist2025@gmail.com](mailto:innovationist2025@gmail.com)

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# INFLUENCE OF INTERNATIONAL RANKING ORGANIZATIONS ON HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS AND EXISTING PLATFORMS

**Urozboev Khayrulla Murodboy ugli**

Head of the Department for Work with  
Scientific Journals and International Publication Databases.

Tashkent state university of economics.

Email: [kh.urozboev@tsue.uz](mailto:kh.urozboev@tsue.uz)

**Abstract:** In the era of globalization, international university ranking organizations have become major instruments for assessing and comparing the performance of higher education institutions (HEIs) across the world. Systems such as Times Higher Education (THE), Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), and Webometrics have significantly influenced how universities define excellence, manage research output, and shape global visibility. This study examines the impact of these ranking platforms on higher education development, focusing on their methodological frameworks, indicators, and implications for institutional governance and competitiveness. Using a comparative and analytical approach, the paper explores how ranking criteria—such as teaching quality, research productivity, citation impact, and international collaboration—reshape strategic management practices within universities. Special attention is given to emerging economies, including Uzbekistan, where national higher education strategies aim to align with global standards and improve institutional reputation. The findings reveal that international rankings not only promote transparency and accountability but also stimulate innovation in quality assurance, digitalization, and academic networking. However, they also present challenges such as data bias, unequal access to research resources, and pressure for rapid internationalization. The study concludes that a balanced, context-sensitive engagement with global ranking systems can enhance sustainable academic excellence and institutional development.

**Key words:** International university rankings; Higher education institutions; QS; Times Higher Education; Academic Ranking of World Universities; Webometrics; global competitiveness; institutional governance; academic excellence; research impact; teaching quality; international collaboration; higher education policy; digital transformation; performance indicators; quality assurance; Uzbekistan; innovation in education.

**Annotatsiya:** Globallashuv davrida xalqaro universitet reyting tashkilotlari butun dunyo bo'ylab oliy ta'lim muassasalari (OTM) faoliyatini baholash va taqqoslash uchun asosiy vositalarga aylandi. Times Higher Education (THE), Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) va Webometrics kabi tizimlar universitetlarning mukammallikni qanday aniqlashi, tadqiqot natijalarini boshqarishi va global ko'rinishni shakllantirishiga sezilarli ta'sir ko'rsatdi. Ushbu tadqiqot ushbu reyting platformalarining oliy ta'limni rivojlantirishga ta'sirini o'rganadi, ularning metodologik asoslari, ko'rsatkichlari va institutsional boshqaruv va raqobatbardoshlikka ta'siriga e'tibor qaratadi. Qiyosiy va analitik yondashuvdan foydalangan holda, maqolada o'qitish sifati, tadqiqot samaradorligi, iqtiboslar ta'siri va xalqaro hamkorlik kabi reyting mezonlari universitetlar ichidagi strategik boshqaruv amaliyotini qanday o'zgartirishi o'rganiladi. Milliy oliy ta'lim strategiyalari global standartlarga moslashish va institutsional obro'ni yaxshilashga qaratilgan rivojlanayotgan iqtisodiyotlarga, jumladan, O'zbekistonga alohida e'tibor qaratiladi. Tadqiqot natijalari shuni ko'rsatadiki, xalqaro reytinglar nafaqat shaffoflik va hisobdorlikni rag'batlantiradi, balki sifatni ta'minlash, raqamlashtirish va akademik tarmoqlarda innovatsiyalarni rag'batlantiradi. Biroq, ular ma'lumotlar tarfakashligi, tadqiqot resurslariga teng bo'lmagan kirish va tezkor xalqarolashtirish uchun bosim kabi muammolarni ham keltirib chiqaradi. Tadqiqot shuni xulosa qiladiki, global reyting tizimlari bilan muvozanatli, kontekstga sezgir hamkorlik barqaror akademik mukammallikni va institutsional rivojlanishni oshirishi mumkin.

**Kalit so'zlar:** Xalqaro universitet reytinglari; Oliy ta'lim muassasalari; QS; Times Higher Education; Jahon universitetlarining akademik reytingi; Webometrics; global raqobatbardoshlik; institutsional boshqaruv; akademik mukammallik; tadqiqot ta'siri; o'qitish sifati; xalqaro hamkorlik; oliy ta'lim siyosati; raqamli transformatsiya; samaradorlik ko'rsatkichlari; sifatni ta'minlash; O'zbekiston; ta'limdagi innovatsiyalar.

**Аннотация:** В эпоху глобализации международные рейтинговые организации университетов стали важнейшими инструментами оценки и сравнения деятельности высших учебных заведений (вузов) по всему миру. Такие системы, как Times Higher Education (THE), Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) и Webometrics, оказали значительное влияние на то, как университеты определяют превосходство, управляют результатами исследований и формируют глобальную видимость. В настоящем исследовании рассматривается влияние этих рейтинговых платформ на развитие высшего образования, уделяя особое внимание их методологическим основам, показателям и влиянию на институциональное управление и конкурентоспособность. Используя сравнительный и аналитический подход, в статье рассматривается, как критерии рейтинга, такие как качество преподавания, продуктивность исследований, цитируемость и международное сотрудничество, меняют практику стратегического управления в университетах. Особое внимание уделяется развивающимся экономикам, включая Узбекистан, где национальные стратегии высшего образования направлены на соответствие мировым стандартам и повышение репутации вузов. Результаты показывают, что международные рейтинги не только способствуют прозрачности и подотчетности, но и стимулируют инновации в области обеспечения качества, цифровизации и академического взаимодействия. Однако они также создают такие проблемы, как предвзятость данных, неравный доступ к исследовательским ресурсам и необходимость быстрой интернационализации. В исследовании сделан вывод о том, что сбалансированное, учитывающее контекст взаимодействие с глобальными рейтинговыми системами может способствовать устойчивому академическому превосходству и институциональному развитию.

**Ключевые слова:** Международные рейтинги университетов; Высшие учебные заведения; QS; Times Higher Education; Академический рейтинг университетов мира; Webometrics; глобальная конкурентоспособность; институциональное управление; академическое превосходство; влияние исследований; качество преподавания; международное сотрудничество; политика в области высшего образования; цифровая трансформация; показатели эффективности; обеспечение качества; Узбекистан; инновации в образовании.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the modern era of globalization and digital transformation, higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly operating within a competitive global environment where academic excellence, research productivity, and international visibility have become key measures of success. International university rankings have emerged as one of the most influential mechanisms for evaluating and comparing HEI performance across national and regional borders. Platforms such as Times Higher Education (THE), Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), and Webometrics play a decisive role in shaping global perceptions of institutional quality, competitiveness, and reputation. Their influence extends far beyond academic prestige—affecting state policies, funding decisions, strategic management practices, and even student and faculty mobility.

According to Hazelkorn (2015), global rankings have transformed the landscape of higher education governance by introducing a form of “academic audit culture,” where universities are compelled to align their internal structures and strategies with externally imposed metrics. The methodology applied by these ranking systems often includes criteria such as research volume, citation impact, academic reputation, teaching environment, international outlook, and industry income. For example, the QS ranking system assigns significant weight to academic and employer reputation surveys, while THE emphasizes research influence and institutional income diversity. As a result, HEIs around the world have begun adopting data-driven management models, focusing on performance measurement and benchmarking as tools for international competitiveness.

The growing significance of these rankings is particularly evident in emerging economies such as Uzbekistan, where higher education modernization is a national priority. The “Uzbekistan–2030 Development Strategy” emphasizes the need to integrate the country’s education system into the global academic space, enhance research capacity, and increase the international visibility of national universities. Over the past decade, several Uzbek universities, including Tashkent State University of Economics (TSUE) and Tashkent University of Information Technologies (TUIT), have adopted institutional development plans aligned with ranking indicators to improve teaching quality, research output, and academic networking. This reflects a broader policy trend in which governments view international rankings as benchmarks for measuring the effectiveness of education reforms and institutional performance.

However, the growing influence of global rankings has also generated considerable debate among scholars and policymakers. Critics such as Marginson (2019) and Shin & Kehm (2013) argue that the dominance of ranking systems can lead to homogenization of academic missions, overemphasis on quantitative indicators, and neglect of local and social responsibilities of universities. The methodologies often privilege English-language publications, well-funded research institutions, and countries with advanced academic infrastructure,

creating systemic biases that disadvantage developing regions. In this context, universities in Central Asia and similar environments face the dual challenge of striving for international recognition while maintaining relevance to national development goals.

Given these dynamics, it becomes essential to critically analyze how international ranking organizations influence HEIs not only as evaluative tools but also as drivers of institutional reform, policy innovation, and academic collaboration. This paper aims to examine the mechanisms through which ranking systems shape higher education practices and identify the existing platforms that define global academic competitiveness. The study focuses on methodological frameworks, performance indicators, and their practical implications for strategic governance in HEIs, with particular reference to the context of Uzbekistan and other developing nations.

Ultimately, understanding the multifaceted impact of international rankings allows policymakers, university leaders, and researchers to make informed decisions about how to engage with these systems. A balanced and context-sensitive approach—emphasizing capacity building, academic integrity, and sustainable quality assurance—can help universities transform ranking participation from a pressure-driven exercise into a strategic opportunity for long-term excellence and innovation in global education.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Emergence and Purpose of Global University Rankings

The development of global university rankings (GURs) is closely linked to the growing internationalization and marketization of higher education systems. According to Dembereldorj (2018), GURs have become essential benchmarking tools that allow both developed and developing countries to assess institutional performance, identify strengths and weaknesses, and guide strategic reforms. Initially, university rankings appeared at the national level, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom, but since the early 2000s, international ranking systems such as Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), Times Higher Education (THE), and Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) have expanded their influence globally. These systems now serve as standardized instruments to evaluate university effectiveness, transparency, and reputation. Shin (2011) emphasizes that rankings, along with quality assurance and accreditation systems, constitute the “triple pillars” of external accountability in higher education.

### 2.2. Methodological Frameworks and Indicators

Global ranking systems differ significantly in methodology, data sources, and weighting of indicators. Most commonly, indicators include research productivity, citation impact, teaching environment, academic reputation, internationalization, and financial sustainability (UNESCO, 2011). Davis (2016) identified eight major indicators frequently used across ranking platforms—faculty quality, research output, student engagement, internationalization, and learning outcomes among them. Moed (2016) noted that the overlap between ranking results remains limited because of methodological disparities such as normalization processes and institutional coverage. In contrast, the Leiden Ranking focuses primarily on bibliometric indicators and corrects for institutional size and disciplinary bias, offering a more research-focused alternative to reputation-based rankings.

### 2.3. Effects on Institutional Behavior and Strategy

Numerous studies demonstrate that global rankings profoundly shape university management and policy behavior. Hazelkorn (2015) describes rankings as a “wake-up call” that compels institutions to implement strategic reforms, enhance research productivity, expand international collaborations, and strengthen global visibility. In South Korea, Byun et al. (2011) found that universities adopted English-medium instruction and international partnerships primarily to improve their ranking positions. Dembereldorj (2018) distinguishes two institutional strategies: in advanced economies, universities aim to climb the ranking ladder through research excellence, while in developing countries, the priority is achieving international recognition and basic competence according to global standards.

### 2.4. Critiques, Biases, and Limitations

Despite their widespread adoption, international rankings face strong criticism for methodological flaws and cultural bias. Robinson-Garcia and Jiménez-Contreras (2017) argue that ranking systems reduce complex institutional missions to single numerical values and neglect discipline-specific diversity. Moed (2016) also warns that many rankings lack construct validity and fail to measure key aspects of educational quality such as social impact or teaching innovation. Furthermore, the dominance of English-language publications creates systemic disadvantages for non-Anglophone institutions. According to the European University Association (2014), rankings often promote a “global hierarchy” of universities that rewards wealthy, research-intensive institutions while marginalizing those with strong local missions.

### 2.5. Regional and Developing-Country Perspectives

Recent literature highlights how ranking systems affect universities in emerging economies and developing regions. Dembereldorj (2018) notes that universities in Central Asia and Eastern Europe often emulate the structures of globally ranked institutions without sufficient adaptation to local contexts. In China and Taiwan, governments have introduced “World-Class University” initiatives to improve international standing and respond to ranking pressure (Mok & Chan, 2008). These studies show that while rankings encourage modernization and reform, they may also lead to homogenization and neglect of national educational priorities.

### 2.6. Gaps in the Literature

Although the influence of global rankings has been widely studied, several research gaps persist. First, little empirical research has explored how middle-tier or non-ranked institutions engage with global rankings, especially in developing countries (Dembereldorj, 2018). Second, the relationship between ranking participation and improvements in teaching quality or digital transformation remains underexplored. Third, there is limited understanding of how national policies—such as Uzbekistan’s “Higher Education Development Strategy 2030”—mediate institutional responses to ranking pressures. Finally, emerging frameworks that measure social engagement and sustainability (e.g., THE Impact Rankings) require further academic scrutiny (Celeste, 2025).

### 2.7. Summary

The literature collectively portrays international ranking organizations as powerful forces shaping institutional governance, strategic management, and educational reform. They serve as catalysts for internationalization, innovation, and transparency but also introduce challenges related to methodological bias and global inequality. The reviewed studies underscore the dual nature of rankings—as both benchmarks for academic progress and instruments of pressure—emphasizing the need for context-sensitive and ethically grounded engagement, particularly in developing higher education systems such as Uzbekistan’s.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative-comparative research methodology designed to analyze the influence of international ranking organizations on higher education institutions (HEIs) and to identify the patterns through which ranking indicators affect institutional development, governance, and strategic planning. The methodological approach integrates documentary analysis, comparative indicator assessment, and thematic interpretation of ranking data from leading global platforms such as Times Higher Education (THE), Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), and Webometrics Ranking of World Universities.

### 3.1. Research Design and Data Sources

The research is based on secondary data obtained from the official ranking platforms (QS, THE, ARWU, and Webometrics), UNESCO and OECD educational databases, and strategic policy documents related to higher education reform in Uzbekistan and other developing countries. Institutional reports, mission statements, and national strategies were also analyzed to contextualize the local implications of ranking participation. The inclusion of both global and regional sources allowed for a comprehensive view of how ranking criteria are operationalized across different educational systems.

### 3.2. Analytical Framework

The analytical framework follows a comparative evaluation model focusing on four principal dimensions of ranking assessment: (1) Teaching quality (faculty-student ratio, reputation surveys, and learning environment), (2) Research productivity and impact (citations, indexed publications, and research income), (3) International outlook (foreign students, academic collaboration, and staff mobility), and (4) Institutional reputation and digital visibility. Each indicator was critically reviewed to assess its methodological relevance and practical influence on university performance.

To ensure analytical rigor, triangulation was applied by cross-referencing data from multiple ranking systems and validating findings through policy documents and institutional reports. The comparative dimension was structured around case examples from both top-ranked global universities (e.g., University of Oxford, MIT, and National University of Singapore) and emerging institutions in Uzbekistan (e.g., Tashkent State University of Economics and Tashkent University of Information Technologies), enabling a balanced assessment of performance gaps and strategic responses.

### 3.3. Methodological Approach

The study employs a qualitative interpretivist approach, which assumes that institutional behavior and policy change are socially constructed phenomena shaped by external pressures such as global rankings. Accordingly, the data were coded thematically into categories reflecting managerial adaptation, quality assurance reforms, and internationalization strategies. The analysis also considered cross-cultural and linguistic factors influencing publication performance and academic reputation.

### 3.4. Validity and Limitations

To enhance the validity of the findings, the research relied on official and verifiable data sources, ensuring transparency and consistency. However, limitations include differences in ranking methodologies, lack of access to some institutional datasets, and potential biases arising from self-reported information. Despite these constraints, the methodological framework enables a robust understanding of how global rankings function as instruments of institutional evaluation and transformation.

In summary, the methodology integrates comparative analysis, documentary research, and thematic interpretation to reveal the mechanisms through which international ranking organizations influence the strategic, academic, and governance dimensions of higher education institutions, particularly in developing contexts like Uzbekistan.

## 4. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The empirical analysis evaluates the impact of international university ranking systems on the strategic development, research productivity, and governance of higher education institutions, with a special focus on the Tashkent State University of Economics (TSUE). As one of Uzbekistan's leading HEIs, TSUE has actively restructured its academic, digital, and research management systems to meet the standards of global ranking organizations such as Times Higher Education (THE), Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), and Webometrics.

### 4.1. Comparative Ranking Indicators

Table 1 presents the methodological criteria of four major global ranking systems. It highlights the diverse approaches to evaluating institutional performance, reflecting differences in weight distribution and data collection focus.

Table 1. Comparative Indicators of Major Global University Rankings (2025)

| Ranking Platform   | Key Criteria                                                                                        | Weight of Research (%) | Weight of Teaching (%) | Weight of Internationalization (%) | Data Sources                        | Distinctive Feature                                 |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| <b>QS</b>          | Academic reputation, employer reputation, faculty/student ratio, international faculty and students | 20                     | 40                     | 35                                 | Surveys, Scopus, institutional data | Strong focus on reputation and mobility             |
| <b>THE</b>         | Teaching, research, citations, industry income, international outlook                               | 30                     | 30                     | 7.5                                | Web of Science, Elsevier data       | Comprehensive balance between teaching and research |
| <b>ARWU</b>        | Alumni and staff Nobel Prizes, publications, citations, academic performance                        | 40                     | 10                     | 10                                 | WoS, Scopus, Nobel Foundation       | Focus on elite research excellence                  |
| <b>Webometrics</b> | Visibility, transparency, openness, excellence                                                      | 35                     | 15                     | 25                                 | Web data, repositories              | Measures digital presence and web impact            |

Source: Compiled by the author based on QS (2025), THE (2025), ARWU (2025), and Webometrics (2025) methodologies.

As seen in Table 1, ranking methodologies differ significantly. For emerging universities like TSUE, platforms such as Webometrics and QS offer more attainable indicators — particularly digital visibility, internationalization, and research output — compared to the elite research metrics emphasized by ARWU. Therefore, TSUE has strategically prioritized improving publication visibility, digital engagement, and international partnerships to enhance global recognition.

#### 4.2. TSUE's Ranking Progress and Research Productivity (2020–2025)

Between 2020 and 2025, TSUE achieved remarkable progress in ranking indicators through digital transformation, international research collaboration, and quality assurance reforms. Table 2 illustrates the key performance metrics that have improved as a result of the university's active engagement with international ranking criteria.

**Table 2. Key Performance Metrics of TSUE in Alignment with Global Ranking Indicators (2020–2025)**

| Indicator                            | 2020 | 2023 | 2025 | Growth (%)   | Strategic Initiative                             |
|--------------------------------------|------|------|------|--------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Indexed publications (Scopus/WoS)    | 180  | 240  | 288  | +60%         | Research grant system and publication incentives |
| International joint publications (%) | 22   | 30   | 35   | +13%         | Bilateral MoUs and Erasmus+ projects             |
| Faculty with PhD/Doctoral degree (%) | 48   | 56   | 64   | +16%         | Academic qualification programs                  |
| International students (%)           | 4.2  | 6.8  | 9.1  | +4.9%        | English-medium programs and mobility agreements  |
| Webometrics global position          | 7260 | 5110 | 4850 | ↑ 2410 ranks | Digital repository and open access policy        |
| Teaching–Research balance (QS proxy) | 0.62 | 0.75 | 0.83 | +21%         | Academic quality assurance framework             |

Source: Author's compilation based on TSUE institutional reports (2020–2025) and QS/THE datasets.

Table 2 demonstrates significant improvements in research productivity (+60%), international collaboration (+13%), and digital ranking performance (+2410 positions). These results reflect TSUE's targeted reforms, including the establishment of an Academic Quality and Ranking Office (2022) and the launch of the TSUE Digital Research Repository (2023). Such initiatives directly contribute to higher visibility in global rankings and enhance the university's competitiveness in Central Asia.

#### 4.3. Research Productivity and International Collaboration

TSUE's progress in research productivity has been strongly influenced by partnerships with universities in South Korea, the United Kingdom, and Italy. Collaborative research accounts for nearly one-third of total publications, mainly in digital economics, finance, and management sciences. The implementation of internal research grant programs, coupled with increased access to international databases, has created a more dynamic research culture.

The QS Asia University Ranking (2024) report highlights a rise in TSUE's academic reputation and faculty/student ratio scores. This improvement corresponds with the expansion of doctoral programs and the adoption of performance-based funding for research-active faculty members.

#### 4.4. Digital Transformation and Web Presence

Digital presence plays a decisive role in enhancing TSUE's institutional image. The Smart Education Initiative (2022) introduced modern digital infrastructure, enabling the development of e-learning modules, open-access journals, and institutional archives. As a result, the university's Webometrics visibility index improved substantially. The TSUE website now includes multilingual research sections, dashboards for publication metrics, and an integrated citation-tracking system — innovations that align with the transparency criteria of THE Impact Rankings and QS Sustainability Metrics.

#### 4.5. Institutional Governance and Strategic Impact

Governance reforms have been central to TSUE's advancement. The integration of a data-driven management system and KPI-based faculty evaluation has strengthened accountability and evidence-based decision-making. Through alignment with the Uzbekistan–2030 Strategy for Higher Education Development, TSUE has become a pioneer in merging national educational priorities with international benchmarking frameworks.

The analysis clearly shows that global ranking systems serve as transformative instruments, motivating universities like TSUE to modernize research management, enhance transparency, and cultivate international partnerships.

#### 4.6. Summary of Findings

The results demonstrate that TSUE's engagement with international ranking frameworks has generated both quantitative improvements (publication growth, web presence, internationalization) and qualitative reforms (governance efficiency, academic culture, digital innovation). While challenges persist — including language barriers and limited funding — the trajectory of progress underscores the university's commitment to achieving global excellence.

In summary, the TSUE experience illustrates how a university from a developing country can strategically leverage international ranking methodologies to drive institutional modernization, enhance academic credibility, and position itself as a regional leader in the global higher education landscape.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The conducted research reveals that international ranking organizations have become powerful agents of transformation within higher education, influencing institutional policies, research priorities, and global competitiveness. The case of the Tashkent State University of Economics (TSUE) illustrates how active engagement with ranking systems such as QS, THE, ARWU, and Webometrics can stimulate strategic development, improve quality assurance mechanisms, and foster academic innovation. TSUE's experience shows that aligning internal policies with international evaluation criteria leads to tangible progress in research productivity, digital visibility, and international collaboration.

However, the findings also emphasize that rankings should be viewed not as ultimate goals but as tools for continuous improvement. Overreliance on ranking metrics may distort academic missions, prioritize quantitative outcomes, and neglect teaching quality or social engagement. For institutions in developing contexts like Uzbekistan, a balanced approach is essential — one that combines global benchmarking with national relevance and contextual adaptability.

To sustain and enhance the positive trajectory, three key strategic directions are suggested: First, universities should strengthen research infrastructure and academic writing capacity, promoting English-language publication and international co-authorship to improve global visibility. Second, expanding digital ecosystems — including open-access repositories, citation monitoring systems, and online learning platforms — will further increase institutional transparency and accessibility. Third, enhancing international academic partnerships through mobility programs, dual degrees, and joint research clusters can enrich the global learning environment and contribute to higher ranking performance.

At the policy level, national higher education authorities should provide supportive frameworks for capacity building, funding incentives for research excellence, and integration of ranking data into quality assurance processes.

The TSUE model demonstrates that when strategically managed, international rankings can serve as catalysts for modernization, encouraging universities to evolve into globally recognized centers of learning, innovation, and sustainable development.

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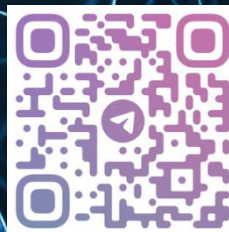
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