LOKMAN HEKIM HEALTH SCIENCES

DOI: 10.14744/lhhs.2025.64374
Lokman Hekim Health Sci 2025;5(2):95–97

lokmanhekimhs.com

EDITORIAL COMMENT

How to Become a Research University: A Strategic Perspective for Health Sciences Universities

Araştırma Üniversitesi Nasıl Olunur: Sağlık Bilimleri Üniversiteleri İçin Stratejik Bir Bakış Açısı

Mehmet Barca

Department of Business Administration, Social Sciences University of Ankara, Faculty of Political Sciences, Ankara, Türkiye

In the past few decades, particularly since the early 2000s, the rise of global university ranking systems has intensified discussions about research efficiency and institutional standing. Many universities have questioned whether they qualify as research universities and have sought pathways to attain this status.[1] Consequently, the concept of the research university has evolved into a central benchmark for assessing higher education institutions. While the ambition to become a research university has gained widespread acceptance, the precise path to achieving this transformation remains unclear.

The Global Landscape of Research Universities

Despite the growing emphasis on research institutions, the majority of the world's more than 25,000 universities remain teaching-focused. The 2025 Times Higher Education World University Rankings assessed over 2,000 institutions from 115 countries, highlighting the rarity of research-intensive universities.[2] Notably, these universities are predominantly concentrated in North America, Europe, and East Asia. Even in countries with the highest number of research universities, teaching institutions dominate. For instance, in the ARWU 2024 Top 1000, the USA has 183 universities ranked, while China leads with 225 universities in the top 1000.,[3] out of more than 3,200 and 3,074 universities, respectively. Meanwhile, India, with over 1,100 universities, has only 15 in the top 1000. Indonesia, despite having 3,300 universities, lacks a single institution on the World-Class Universities (WCU) list. These statistics underscore the reality that research universities remain a minority and are unevenly distributed across the globe.

Pressures Driving the Research University Agenda

Over the last two decades, universities have faced mounting pressures to achieve research university status. These pressures stem from three primary sources:

1. **Global Trends:** University ranking initiatives have shifted the focus from teaching quality to research excellence in the eyes of many influential circles, including the media and business sectors. The global race to be listed among WCUs has become an essential marker of modernization, globalization, and the knowledge economy for these stakeholders.

Cite this article as: *Barca M. How to Become a Research University: A Strategic Perspective for Health Sciences Universities. Lokman Hekim Health Sci 2025;5(2):95–97.*

Correspondence: Mehmet Barca, M.D. Ankara Sosyal Bilimler Üniversitesi, Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi, İşletme Bölümü, Ankara, Türkiye
E-mail: mehmet.barca@asbu.edu.tr **Submitted:** 14.03.2025 **Revised:** 22.03.2025 **Accepted:** 02.04.2025

2. **Governmental Influence:** Many governments, such as those of Vietnam and Türkiye, have sought to enhance their country's global standing in academia and industry by placing their universities on the WCU list. This has been pursued by selecting and supporting key universities that engage in intensive research and produce high-impact publications, providing them with strategic financial support, enhanced research infrastructure, and other incentives.[4]
3. **Institutional Ambitions:** Internally, universities—regardless of their existing research capacity—have set ambitious goals to attain research university status. The emphasis on academic research has spread worldwide, making the transformation into a research university a widely discussed objective. Thus, shifting toward a research-driven model has become a priority for universities globally.[5]

Consequently, it has become increasingly common to discuss the transformation of teaching-intensive universities into research-driven institutions. For health sciences universities, this shift is even more pressing. Given their pivotal role in medical advancements and public health, there is a strong and growing emphasis on adopting a research-focused model—one that seamlessly integrates scientific discovery with education and healthcare innovation.

Challenges and Strategic Pathways for Health Sciences Universities

Despite widespread aspirations, many universities' attempts to become research-intensive institutions have not yielded the expected results. Rankings have remained largely unchanged, indicating that most transformation initiatives have fallen short. This reality prompts critical questions: Why have many universities failed to achieve research university status, and what strategies can ensure success?

A research university is characterized by its emphasis on knowledge creation, with research serving as the foundation for education and innovation. While teaching remains essential, research must be integrated into the institution's core business model. Achieving this transformation requires a clear strategic vision, comprehensive planning, and strong leadership. Importantly, given the competitive nature of higher education, universities must adopt a strategic approach that positions them effectively within the global research landscape. For health sciences universities, this transformation is particularly crucial, as they are at the forefront of this race.

Essential Strategies for Becoming a Research University

To support the transformation of a university from a teaching institution to a research institution, the following strategies are essential:

1. Positioning Strategy

Positioning involves formulating a strategy for success by distinguishing oneself from competitors.[6] The underlying assumption is that the success of a research university primarily depends on how effectively it differentiates itself from its rivals, as there is no single best path to success. In this respect:

- Universities must differentiate themselves by strategically managing their internal and external stakeholders—academics, students, funders, and policymakers—to establish themselves as research institutions.
- Universities must restructure their value chain, aligning research, education, and entrepreneurship to their chosen strategic position.
- Universities must define their research priorities. For health sciences universities, this could involve focusing on areas such as infectious diseases, non-communicable diseases, personalized medicine, or biomedical innovation.

2. Competence Strategy

Strategic positioning alone is insufficient without concrete investments in institutional competencies.[7] The assumption here is that a university's ability to achieve and maintain a competitive advantage depends on its unique resources and capabilities, which reinforce its chosen strategic position. In this respect:

- Resources: Universities must develop robust research infrastructures, recruit top-tier faculty, and secure funding to support sustained research productivity. Health sciences universities must ensure they have the necessary research facilities, clinical partnerships, and technological capabilities to support high-impact medical research.
- Capabilities: Universities must build organizational research capabilities to outperform competitors. Organizational capabilities are essential for effectively embedding progressive, engaged research practices in a sustainable manner, extending beyond a small core of dedicated enthusiasts.

3. Value-Creation Strategy

While strategic positioning and competency-building are crucial, mid-term value creation takes precedence at the

tactical level. The assumption here is that higher education is constantly evolving, and success factors in research must be periodically reassessed.[8] In this respect:

- Universities must assess future trends in higher education and identify key factors that will influence research productivity and global competitiveness.
- Universities must determine how to manage these factors to maximize mid-term value—deciding which factors to discard, increase, decrease, or introduce. For health sciences institutions, value creation may involve developing translational research programs, fostering industry partnerships, and emphasizing healthcare innovation that addresses global health challenges.

4. Management Strategy

Above all, universities must embrace a transformative management paradigm that includes distributed innovation, participative decision-making, and competition-driven mechanisms.[9] The assumption here is that an innovative management approach is key to responding effectively to environmental shifts while sustaining competitive advantage. In this respect:

- Universities must establish dedicated research offices, implement performance measurement systems, and create incentive structures that prioritize research output.
- Beyond structural reforms, universities must cultivate a research-oriented culture.
- Faculty and researchers should be supported through professional development programs, grant-writing assistance, and international collaboration opportunities.
- Universities must gain legitimacy and support for their research university vision. If academics do not perceive the vision as feasible, beneficial, and well-supported, institutional transformation efforts will face resistance.
- Universities must develop institutional—not just individual—leadership and foster an ecosystem that supports sustained research excellence.

Taking these strategies into account, Lokman Hekim University—a young health sciences institution founded in 2017—has embarked on a transformative journey to shift the core of its business model from teaching to research. By repositioning itself as a research university, the institution aims to achieve success by prioritizing key research areas, building organizational research capabilities around these priorities, identifying and formulating competitive factors that drive mid-term value creation, and evolving its management approach and institutional culture. This transformation is not merely a strategic plan but an advanced practice of strategic management, ensuring that the approach is embedded across all levels of the organization. A strong emphasis is placed on fostering broad institutional support to cultivate a sense of ownership—not only of the strategy itself but also of its continuous adaptation—at every level of the university.

In conclusion, universities can shape their journey toward becoming research institutions by establishing a deeply embedded, strategically informed culture of reflective practice. To this end, universities must adopt a phased approach to transformation, progressing through foundational, growth, advanced, and world-class research university stages. Each stage requires careful planning, sustained financial investment, and a strong commitment to research excellence.

Conflict of Interest: None declared.

Financial Disclosure: The author declared that this study received no financial support.

Use of AI for Writing Assistance: The author declared that artificial intelligence (AI) supported technologies were not used in the study.

Peer-review: Double blind peer-reviewed.

References

1. Intsiful E, Maassen P. Actors' interpretations and organisational change processes: The case of the University of Ghana's strategic vision of becoming a "world class university". J Educ Pract 2017;8(5):1-11.
2. Times Higher Education. Empowering global higher education. Available at: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/ Accessed July 1, 2025.
3. Shanghai Ranking. Academic ranking of world universities. Available at: https://www.shanghairanking.com/rankings/arwu/2024 Accessed July 1, 2025.
4. Nguyen Q, Klopper C, Smith C. Affordances, barriers, and motivations: Engagement in research activity by academics at the research-oriented university in Vietnam. Open Rev Educ Res 2016;3(1):68-84. [CrossRef]
5. Brew A, Lucas L, Editors. Academic research and researchers. Maidenhead: Open University Press/McGraw Hill Education; 2009.
6. Porter ME, Teisberg EO. Redefining health care: Creating value-based competition on results. Boston: Harvard Business Press; 2006.
7. Grant RM. Contemporary strategy analysis: Text and cases. 12th ed. Hoboken (NJ): Wiley; 2024.
8. Kim WC, Mauborgne R. Blue ocean strategy: How to create uncontested market space and make the competition irrelevant. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press; 2015.
9. Hamel G. Moon shots for management. Harv Bus Rev 2009;87(2):91-8.