

Catching and Opening Up for World Class University: Case Study at Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia

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Abstract: *The era of "World-Class University" (WCU) has become one of the main concerns for many universities, including Indonesia. As one of the country's leading public universities, Universitas Negeri Semarang (Semarang State University) is committed to pursuing WCU status through a range of academic innovations and institutional reforms. This study applies a case study method to examine the strategies adopted and challenges faced by UNNES in its WCU journey. The research is based on institutional data and performance comparisons with other universities in Indonesia and the broader Asian region. UNNES experienced a decline in its QS Asia University Rankings, falling from 601–650 in 2021 to 751–800 in 2025, primarily due to insufficient data submission, limited international publications, and weak global collaboration. To address these issues, this paper recommends consistent participation in QS data reporting, improved research output, enhanced partnerships with leading universities, and stronger engagement with industry. With sustained commitment and well-targeted strategies, UNNES has the potential to improve its international standing and advance toward its vision of becoming a globally competitive university.*

Keywords: Asia, case study, strategic plan, World Class University

1. Introduction

In the competitive landscape of globalization, higher education institutions are expected to undergo continuous transformation to produce globally competent human resources. The pursuit of "World-Class University" (WCU) status has become a key focus for many institutions worldwide, including those in Indonesia. This concept refers to universities that excel internationally in terms of educational quality, research output, and socio-economic contributions (Altbach & Salmi, 2011).

The Indonesian government has implemented several strategic measures to promote its institutions in attaining WCU designation. These include granting greater institutional autonomy, increasing research funding, and strengthening international collaboration (Prasojo et al., 2020). Universitas Negeri Semarang (Semarang State University), one of Indonesia's top universities, is dedicated to becoming a WCU by putting several academic transformation and innovation initiatives into practice.

Nonetheless, the journey toward achieving WCU status remains challenging. Constraints such as limited resources, stakeholder demands, and the complexity of higher education governance persist as significant obstacles (Sukoco et al., 2021). In addition, a major issue for Indonesian universities lies in producing graduates and academic personnel who possess both strong local competencies and global competitiveness (Murdowo, 2018). In the context of developing countries such as Indonesia, the pursuit of WCU status necessitates a comprehensive and integrated strategy (Rosser, 2019). This strategy must transcend purely quantitative performance metrics and place equal emphasis on the relevance, quality, and impact of educational outcomes. For institutions like Semarang State University, analytical tools such as Data Envelopment Analysis (DEA) can be employed to systematically evaluate the efficiency of resource utilization and overall institutional performance (Ibrahim & Fadhli, 2021).

Higher education reform in Indonesia also calls for a collaborative approach involving government, universities, and the broader society (Suryadarma & Jones, 2013). This aligns with earlier studies advocating for more flexible and adaptive higher education governance systems globally (Jacob et al., 2012). The ability of universities to establish strong international partnerships is a critical step toward becoming a WCU. International collaboration enhances institutional reputation and enables broader knowledge exchange (Croom, 2010). Furthermore, globalization presents both opportunities and challenges for Asian universities, including those in Indonesia (Beerkens, 2003). While it offers increased access to global academic resources, it also demands stronger competitiveness within the international academic landscape.

This study adopts a case study approach to explore the strategies and challenges faced by Semarang State University in its efforts to achieve WCU status. The analysis draws on available data to assess UNNES' performance in comparison with other universities in Indonesia and across Asia.

2. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to explore the strategies and efforts of Universitas Negeri Semarang (Semarang State University) in achieving World-Class University (WCU) status. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, focus group discussions with faculty and students, and document analysis of strategic plans, institutional reports, and performance metrics. Secondary data, including international ranking data, were also analyzed to assess the university's progress. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants and data sources relevant to the research objectives. Thematic analysis was applied to qualitative data to identify key themes, while quantitative performance metrics were examined to track trends.

3. Results and Discussion

UNNES Transformation to Legal Entity State University (PTN-BH)

The transformation of UNNES PTN-BLU (Public Service Entity) into UNNES PTN-BH (Legal Entity) is in accordance with Republic of Indonesia Government Regulation Number 36 of 2022 concerning State Universities, Legal Entities, Semarang State University. As PTN-BH, UNNES has been prepared with new changes in vision, mission and goals. UNNES new vision is "To Become a University with a World Reputation and a Pioneer of Educational Excellence with a Conservation Insight". There are three key words in the vision that UNNES wants to achieve, namely world reputation, pioneering educational excellence, and conservation insight. For world reputation, UNNES has constructed its milestone to achieve

the vision. The milestone mainly concerns each achievement for a specific range of periodic years. Figure 1 shows the milestone of UNNES in the next 20 years.

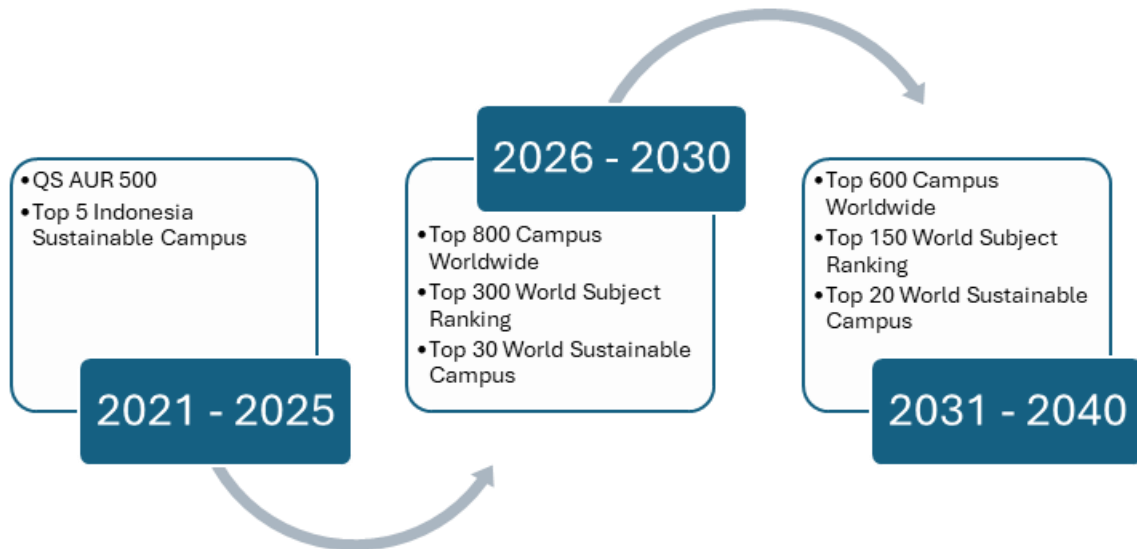


Figure 1: UNNES Milestone 2021 - 2040

Void Period of World Class University Management

Semarang State University (UNNES) first participated in World Class University through the QS World University Rankings in 2019 for the 2021 assessment. At that time, UNNES managed to achieve rank 601-650 in the QS Asia University Rankings. However, in 2023, UNNES experienced a decline in ranking to 751-800 due to inactive data filling during 2019 – 2023 period. This decline in ranking is a serious challenge that requires in-depth analysis of the causal factors and strategies to restore UNNES's achievements at the international level.

The factors causing declining in ranking are:

1. QS data is the main source of assessment in ranking. UNNES's inactivity in filling out results in lost opportunities to increase UNNES's ranking.
2. The number and quality of international publications indexed in Scopus or Web of Science greatly influences rankings in academic reputation and citation indicators.
3. Academic and institutional reputation, obtained from global surveys of academics and employers, may decline without consistent efforts to build and promote a positive image of UNNES.
4. The lack of international cooperation in research, student exchanges and double degree programs contributes to low internationalization indicator scores.
5. The absence of a dedicated team or sustainable strategy for collecting and reporting QS data results in misalignment in the management of key indicators.

The priority action that must be take into account are:

1. Immediately update data on the QS World University Ranking platform.
2. Forming a World Class University Task Force team.
3. Identifying reputable journals that are relevant for publishing UNNES research.
4. Providing training and mentoring for lecturers to improve the quality of research.

The decline in UNNES's position in the QS Asia University Rankings can be attributed to the institution's limited engagement in data submission and underperformance in several key indicators, particularly international publications and academic reputation. Addressing this

issue requires a comprehensive and coordinated strategy that focuses on enhancing data reporting practices, improving research output, strengthening institutional reputation, advancing internationalization efforts, and formulating long-term development plans. With sustained commitment and strategic action, UNNES has the potential to reclaim its trajectory toward global recognition and reinforce its standing as a world-class university.

UNNES Existing Data and Performance Analysis (Based on QS World University Ranking)

Table 1 displays the scores for several QS Ranking performance indicators from Semarang State University (UNNES) for 2022 to 2025.

Table 1: UNNES scoring for QS Asia University Ranking 2022 – 2025

Criteria	2022	2023	2024	2025
Academic Reputation	9.7	9.6	11.2	21.8
Employer Reputation	3.9	3.7	3.6	11.1
Faculty-Student Ratio	1.9	2.1	1	4.3
Paper per Faculty	3.4	5.7	4.4	4.7
Citation per Paper	1.1	1	1.2	1.1
Int. Faculty	2.1	1.8	1.7	5.4
Int. Student	1.8	1.7	1.6	1.5
Outbound Exchange	7.1	7.3	6.6	1.9
Inbound Exchange	4.1	4.1	3.8	2.4
Int. Research Network	2	1.2	1.1	3.0
Staff with PhD	1	1	1	1.1
Employment Outcomes				
Sustainability	Available at World University Ranking			
Citation per Faculty				
Overall	n.a	5.8	6.3	10.1
Ranking (QS AUR)	601 - 650	701 - 750	751 - 800	751 - 800

Prominent Indicator

Academic Reputation (21.8)

In 2025, this indicator demonstrated relatively strong performance when compared to other metrics. The improved score suggests growing recognition of UNNES's academic quality among international academic peers. This progress may be attributed to ongoing efforts to strengthen academic reputation, including involvement in international conferences, collaborative research initiatives, and enhanced visibility of scholarly publications.

Employer Reputation (11.1)

This indicator shows significant improvement, although it is still quite low overall. This increase reflects efforts to strengthen ties with the industries through internship programs, industry collaboration, or alumni in important positions.

Urgently Improvement Needed Indicator

Universitas Negeri Semarang (UNNES), a prominent public university in Indonesia, has made incremental progress in select areas of the QS World University Rankings (QS WUR). However, core indicators tied to internationalization and research output continue to demonstrate significant underperformance, subsequently constraining its global positioning. This analysis focuses on five critical metrics: Faculty/Student Ratio (4.7), International Faculty

(1.1), International Students (1.5), Citations per Faculty (5.4), and Exchange Students (Inbound: 1.9; Outbound: 2.4), each of which scored below regional and global benchmarks.

Faculty/Student Ratio (4.7)

The Faculty/Student Ratio score indicates a high student-to-lecturer burden, potentially impacting instructional quality and limiting research productivity. Addressing this imbalance through strategic recruitment of new academic staff—particularly those with doctoral degrees, international training, or research credentials—is imperative. Institutional policies must prioritize funding for faculty development and equitable distribution of academic workloads.

International Faculty (1.1) and International Students (1.5)

International faculty and student representation remains critically low. These figures suggest an insufficient presence of foreign academics and learners within the university ecosystem; an area increasingly used as a proxy for global engagement and attractiveness. To improve, UNNES should implement three key strategies: (1) offer targeted scholarships and incentives to attract international students, particularly from ASEAN partner countries; (2) establish joint and double-degree programs with reputable foreign universities to increase inbound mobility; and (3) initiate structured faculty exchange and visiting scholar programs to enhance cross-border academic collaboration. These steps will boost global visibility, enrich academic diversity, and strengthen UNNES's competitiveness in international rankings.

Citations per Faculty (5.4)

The citation metric of 5.4 per faculty underscores the limited international impact and visibility of UNNES-authored publications. This figure suggests that research outputs are not widely recognized or cited within global academic networks, which may be attributed to limited engagement with international publication standards, insufficient collaboration, and low exposure at global academic forums. To address this challenge, three strategic solutions are proposed. First, UNNES should strengthen its publication strategy by encouraging faculty to target high-impact, Scopus indexed journals, especially those ranked in Q1–Q3 quartiles. This can be supported through dedicated workshops on scientific writing, journal selection, and open-access publishing models to improve manuscript quality and submission success rates. Second, increasing interdisciplinary and international research collaboration is essential. UNNES can facilitate this by creating internal funding schemes for joint research projects with foreign institutions, encouraging co-authorship with international scholars, and participating in global research consortiums; an approach empirically linked to higher citation performance. Third, enhancing faculty participation in international academic conferences and scholarly mobility programs will expose researchers to cutting-edge knowledge and global audiences. Providing financial and administrative support for conference attendance and research visits abroad will not only increase academic visibility but also foster networks that lead to future collaborations and citations.

Exchange Students (Inbound/Outbound)

The QS metrics for student exchange at UNNES show a clear downward trend from 2022 to 2025, with outbound exchange scores dropping from 7.3 in 2023 to 1.9 in 2025, and inbound exchange declining from 4.1 in 2022–2023 to 2.4 in 2025. This decline reflects a weakening in both sending students abroad and attracting international students to UNNES, potentially due to reduced global partnerships, limited funding, or administrative barriers. To reverse this trend, UNNES should revitalize its international collaborations by renewing MoU and targeting reciprocal partnerships, particularly with ASEAN and Asia-Pacific institutions. Providing financial incentives such as mobility grants and inbound scholarships can increase

participation. In addition, alternative strategies such as virtual exchange and collaborative online learning can help sustain international engagement in the face of physical mobility constraints. Strengthening global visibility through strategic marketing and showcasing successful exchange experiences will further enhance UNNES’s appeal as a globally connected institution.

Table 1 shows that UNNES has experienced some improvements in certain indicators but still faces major challenges in terms of internationalization and research. With right and sustainable strategy, UNNES has a great opportunity to improve its position in the QS Ranking in the future.

UNNES QS Asia University Ranking (QS AUR) Indicator Detailed Analysis Reputation Based Indicator

The absence of world class university management from UNNES in inputting contact list data for academic and employer reputation resulted in a low overall score for this indicator. The UNNES score was stagnant during the 2021 – 2024 period. In the 2025 ranking year, UNNES began to reorganize management for WCU and succeeded in inputting 152 data for the academic survey and 98 data for the employer survey. This has caused this indicator to experience a significant increase even though compared to peer universities in Indonesia it is still said to be quite low.

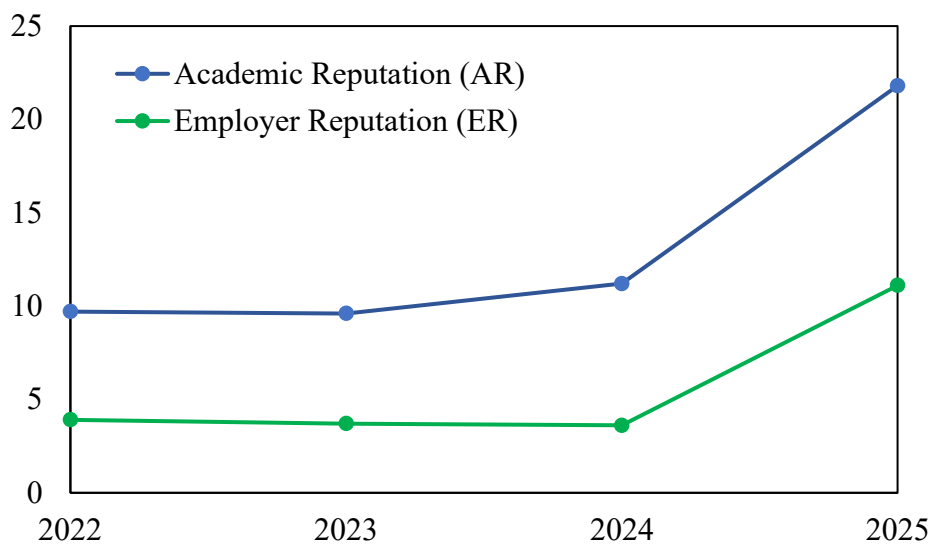


Figure 2: AR and ER score of UNNES 2022 - 2025

As shown in Figure 2, consistency in inputting data is key to determining performance under reputation-based criteria. This is demonstrated by the fact although UNNES submitted only 152 out of 400 for academic peers and 98 out of 400 for employer contact, it successfully increased Academic Reputation (AR) and Employer Reputation (ER) scores, respectively 94.6% and 208.3%. This significant improvement reflects the responsiveness of the QS ranking system to institutional participation and highlights the importance of systematic data submission and strategic engagement. In the QS AUR for Indonesia universities in 2024, the level above UNNES for ER is Hasanuddin University (18) and followed by Padjadjaran University (46.2). In the AR category for 2024, compared to the Top 5 universities in Indonesia, such as IPB University (42.9) and Airlangga University (61.4). These comparative figures underscore that, while UNNES has achieved notable progress in both academic and employer

reputation metrics, further advancement will require sustained, multidimensional, and evidence-based strategies. This includes not only improving the quantity and quality of data submissions but also enhancing institutional visibility, fostering stronger stakeholder engagement, and maintaining a continuous cycle of performance monitoring and evaluation. Such efforts are vital for elevating the university’s credibility and positioning within both national and regional higher education landscapes.

Recommended strategies for improving UNNES Academic Reputation (AR) and Employer Reputation (ER) are as follows:

1. Improve Data Submission to QS Platform
 Although data submission remains below the optimal level (152 for academic peers and 98 for employers), partial input has significantly impacted the scores. UNNES should establish a dedicated team to manage data collection, validation, and integration with an internal database aligned with QS requirements.
2. Strengthen Industry Collaboration
 Partnerships with industry are vital for improving employer reputation. UNNES should expand internship programs, offer market relevant training, and conduct tracer studies to highlight graduate outcomes and increase employer confidence.
3. Expand Global Engagement and Visibility
 Active participation in internal academic forums, promoting institutional achievements, and publishing alumni successes through digital media will increase the visibility and reputation of UNNES among academics and employers.
4. Adopt Best Practices from Leading Universities
 Learning from the strategies of top universities in Indonesia such as Hasanuddin, Padjadjaran, IPB, and Airlangga. Increase academic collaboration, research and industrial relations to accelerate the achievement of the target of increasing UNNES' reputation in the QS Rankings.

International Outlook

This indicator consist of international faculty (IF), international students (IS), and student exchange (inbound (IE) – outbound (OE)). In the 2022 – 2025 period, UNNES will experience score fluctuations because this indicator does not yet have a good strategy platform. Figure 3 shows the UNNES international outlook related category score in QS AUR.

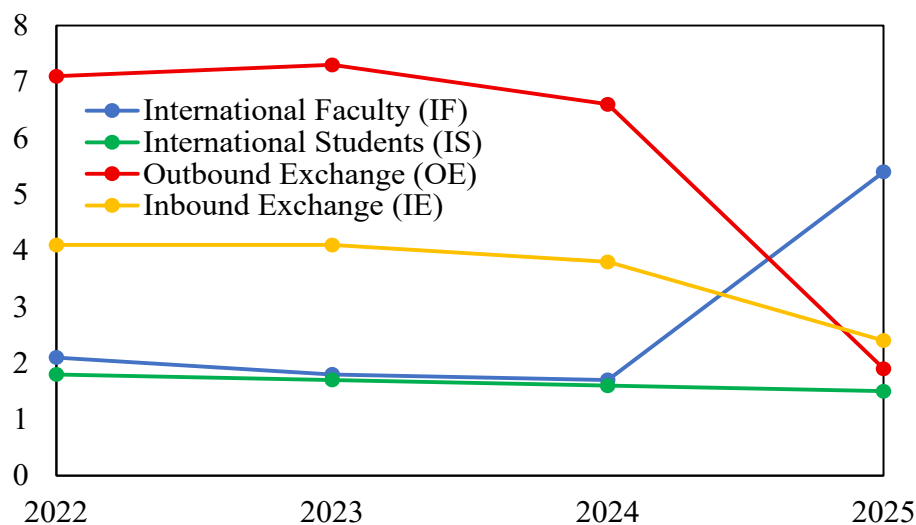


Figure 3: UNNES International Outlook Related Category Score of QS AUR

Figure 3 illustrates the trend of key international outlook indicators for UNNES between 2022 and 2025. The figure reveals notable fluctuations and structural inconsistencies across the observed period. Most prominently, the score for IF remained relatively low and stagnant until 2024, followed by a sharp increase in 2025, potentially due to renewed recruitment efforts or improved data reporting mechanisms. In contrast, OE exhibited a consistent decline, dropping drastically from above 7 in 2023 to below 2 in 2025. Similarly, the IE score remained stable from 2022 to 2023, experienced a slight decline in 2024, and then sharply decreased in 2025, suggesting weakening student mobility programs. The IS indicator demonstrated a steady downward trajectory, reflecting challenges in attracting and retaining international students. Collectively, these trends indicate that UNNES internationalization efforts lack a coherent and sustainable framework. While the spike in IF offers a promising development, the simultaneous deterioration of OE, IE, and IS underscores the need for a more balanced and strategic approach to enhancing the university's global engagement profile. The strength of the UNNES international outlook when compared with the median score in Asia is an indicator that requires special attention can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Comparison of UNNES score with Asia University Median Data

Criteria	UNNES Data	Asia University Median Data
IF	1.5 per 100 faculty	4.6 per 100 faculty
IS	0.2 per 100 faculty	2.8 per 100 faculty
IE	0.1 per 100 students	0.8 per 100 students
OE	0.1 per 100 students	0.6 per 100 students

Table 2 presents a comparative analysis of UNNES's performance in key internationalization indicators, specifically IF, IS, IE, and OE, in relation to the median scores of Asian universities. The results demonstrate a consistent underperformance across all measured categories, indicating that UNNES has yet to establish a solid foundation for global academic engagement. The markedly lower figures in IF and IS suggest that the institution has not yet succeeded in attracting foreign academic talent or appealing to international student populations, which are essential elements in building a globally oriented academic environment. Meanwhile, the minimal scores in IE and OE reflect limited student mobility programs and a lack of strategic collaboration with overseas institutions. Collectively, these findings reveal not only quantitative performance gaps but also qualitative weaknesses in the university's internationalization strategy, which must be addressed through targeted, sustainable, and structurally integrated reforms.

UNNES needs to improve overall international engagement and outlook by:

1. Enhance international faculty recruitment by improving campus infrastructure and offering attractive incentive packages to make UNNES a competitive destination for global academic talent.
2. Develop a global promotion network by participating in international education exhibitions and outreach programs to increase the visibility of UNNES and attract more international students.
3. Expand collaborative academic programs such as global summer schools, joint virtual classrooms, and MOOCs to support both inbound and outbound student exchange and strengthen international academic engagement.
4. Leverage the international alumni network by empowering graduates to act as global ambassadors in promoting UNNES's academic strengths and international initiatives.

Research Performance

This indicator is consisting of research productivity (papers per faculty / PPF), research quality (citations per paper/CPP), and research collaboration (international research network/IRN). The UNNES research performance of QS AUR is shown in Figure 4.

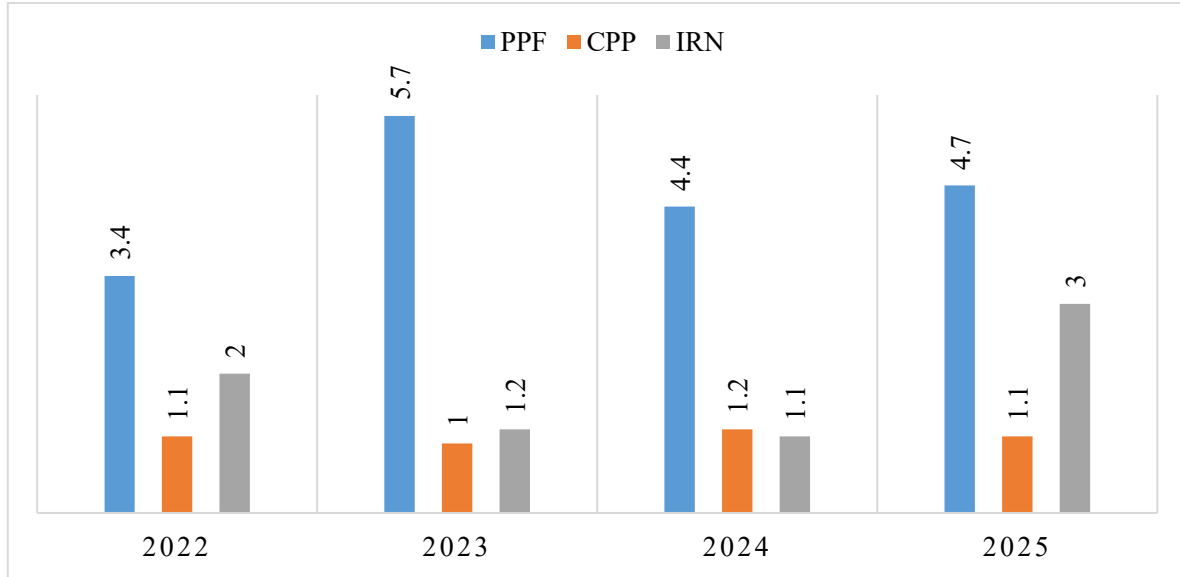


Figure 4: UNNES Research Performance Related Category Score of QS AUR

Figure 4 shows that UNNES’s research performance remains inconsistent across key QS indicators, PPF, CPP, and IRN, from 2022 to 2025. While PPF experienced a temporary peak in 2023, it declined in 2024 and recovered slightly in 2025, indicating fluctuations in research productivity likely due to the absence of sustained institutional support. CPP remained stagnant at a low level throughout the period, suggesting that research outputs lack global impact and visibility, possibly due to publication in lower-tier journals or insufficient international collaboration. IRN showed a modest increase in 2025, but the overall score still reflects weak integration into global research networks. These trends highlight the need for a more structured and strategic approach to research development, focusing on quality enhancement, international collaboration, and targeted capacity building. These findings, further confirmed by the comparative data in Table 3, show that UNNES continues to underperform relative to the median scores of universities in Asia. Therefore, to improve its research standing, UNNES must adopt a more strategic and innovative research policy one that prioritizes quality over quantity, encourages global collaboration, and invests in long-term capacity building.

Table 3: Comparison of UNNES score with Asia University Median Data in Research

Criteria	UNNES Data	Asia University Median
PPF	1.2 paper per faculty (over 5 years)	3.9 paper per faculty (over 5 years)
CPP	2.3 citation per paper (over 5 years)	7.7 citation per paper (over 5 years)
IRN	2.4 out of 100	15.9 out of 100

Table 3 reveals a substantial disparity between the research performance of Universitas Negeri Semarang (UNNES) and the median scores of Asian universities across three key QS research indicators: Papers per Faculty (PPF), Citations per Paper (CPP), and International Research Network (IRN). Specifically, UNNES produces an average of only 1.2 papers per faculty over a five-year period, well below the regional median of 3.9. This low publication rate may be attributed to several interrelated institutional factors, including insufficient research funding,

heavy teaching loads, a lack of structured incentives for publication, and limited mentorship in academic writing and research design. Such conditions constrain the capacity of faculty members to consistently produce publishable research, especially in peer-reviewed international journals.

The citation metric (CPP) paints an equally concerning picture. With an average of just 2.3 citations per paper—compared to the Asian university median of 7.7—UNNES research outputs appear to have limited visibility and influence in the global academic discourse. This shortfall suggests not only a low volume of impactful publications, but also issues related to the choice of journals, limited international collaboration, and perhaps weak dissemination strategies. Research published in local or non-indexed journals, while valuable for community engagement, often lacks the reach and discoverability necessary for global citation. To address this, the university must implement a targeted strategy to support faculty in publishing in Scopus- and Web of Science-indexed journals with higher impact and wider readership.

The International Research Network (IRN) score is particularly revealing: UNNES registers just 2.4 out of 100, compared to a regional benchmark of 15.9. This low score signals an acute underdevelopment in collaborative research activities with international partners. Such collaborations are increasingly seen as a cornerstone of impactful science, as evidenced by literature demonstrating a strong positive correlation between international co-authorship and citation rates. The lack of joint research projects, limited faculty mobility, and the absence of participation in global academic consortia all contribute to this minimal engagement with the international research community.

Nevertheless, despite these performance gaps, recent developments at UNNES suggest a slow but positive trajectory. Between 2013 and 2024, the university has recorded notable progress in both the volume and quality of its scholarly output. There has been a measurable increase in the number of publications indexed in Scopus and Web of Science, with a growing proportion appearing in Q1 and Q2 journals. This trend is indicative of institutional efforts to enhance research culture, including internal capacity-building initiatives such as research methodology workshops, incentive schemes for high-quality publications, and strategic recruitment of research-active faculty. However, to meaningfully close the gap with regional peers, UNNES must accelerate and institutionalize these efforts. A comprehensive research development strategy—anchored in international collaboration, focused investment in high-potential research clusters, and systematic performance monitoring—is essential. The university's upward trajectory shows promise, but sustained and coordinated action is required to transform this momentum into long-term global research competitiveness.

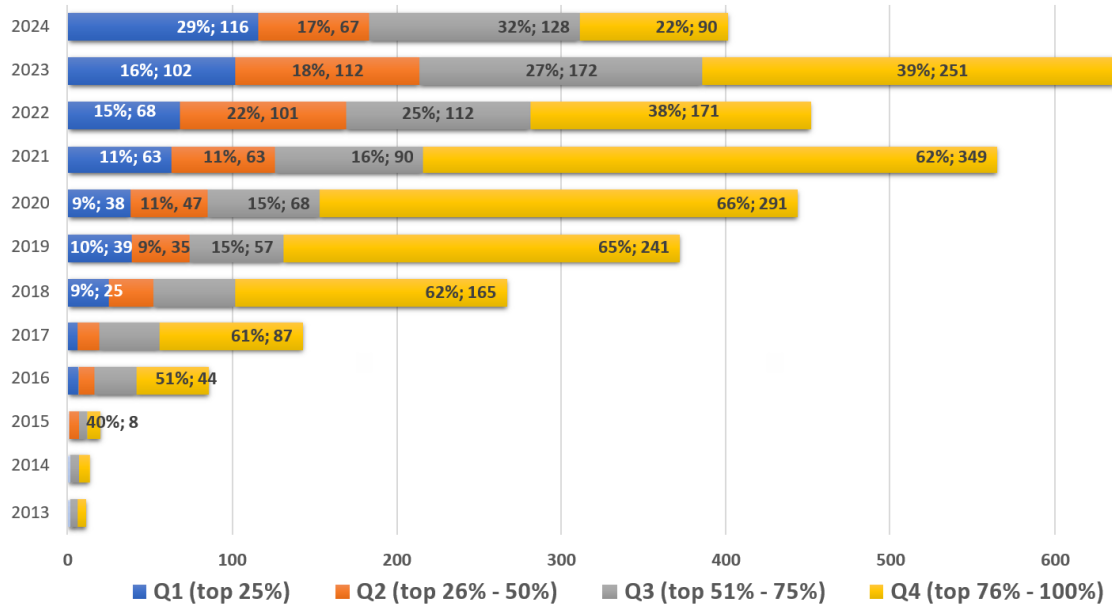


Figure 5: UNNES Publication in International Reputable Journal 2013 - 2024

Figure 5 shows a substantial upward trend in both the volume and quality of UNNES’s scientific publications from 2013 to 2024. Starting from a low base, the university has progressively increased its output, with a notable surge after 2018. Although Q4 journals still represent a significant portion of the total, particularly in 2023, where 39% of publications fell into this category, there has been a marked improvement in high-impact publications. In 2024, Q1 and Q2 journals accounted for 29% and 17% of the output, respectively, reflecting the highest share of top-tier publications to date. This shift signals a gradual transformation in the university’s research culture, with increased efforts to target reputable international journals and raise academic standards. The declining reliance on Q4 outlets suggests a growing institutional awareness of the importance of global visibility and citation impact. These improvements indicate that UNNES is beginning to strengthen its research orientation not only in terms of quantity but also in alignment with international quality benchmarks, laying a more solid foundation for global academic competitiveness.

To catch up in terms of research, it is necessary to do the following:

1. Increasing the quality and number of publications in international reputable journals. This can be achieved by facilitating researchers at UNNES to collaborate more with foreign universities and increasing their capacity in writing publications that can be accepted by international journals.
2. Align research focus with societal needs, particularly in areas relevant to sustainability, education, and local industrial development, to maximize the relevance and societal contribution of UNNES's research output.
3. Strengthen partnerships with domestic and international universities and research institutions, enabling access to joint research funding, broader knowledge exchange, and increased opportunities for collaborative innovation.

4. Conclusion

Semarang State University (UNNES) has transformed into a Legal Entity State University (PTN-BH) with a vision to become a university with a world reputation and a pioneer of educational excellence with conservation insights. However, UNNES faces significant

challenges in international rankings, experiencing a decline from 601-650 in 2021 to 751-800 in 2025. This decline was caused by inactivity in filling in QS data, low international publications, and limited international collaboration. To overcome this problem, UNNES needs to immediately update data on the QS platform, form a Task Force team to manage the World Class University, and improve the quality of research through lecturer training. Although some indicators show improvement, such as academic reputation, there are still challenges in faculty-student ratios and international collaboration. Therefore, strategic recommendations include consistency in filling in QS data, strengthening relationships with the world of work, and collaborating with leading universities. With strong commitment and the right strategy, UNNES has the opportunity to improve its position in international rankings and achieve its vision of becoming a world-class university.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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