

**Latin American Universities and the International Rankings:
Impact, Scope and Limits
Final Declaration
May 18, 2012**

The conference *Latin American Universities and the International Rankings: Impact, Scope and Limits* sought to provide a space for dialogue and debate on the international university classification systems. Throughout the course of the meetings, university rectors, ranking producers, and academic specialists presented their views and perspectives. We believe the event successfully fulfilled its mission.

In an effort to spur further debate on the issues, as well as to prompt the implementation of the resulting initiatives and responses, we have compiled and systematized the main ideas and proposals expressed throughout the conference. This Final Declaration offers the combined vision of the participants, which we hope will be further enriched with views from throughout the region, with the goal of presenting a common Latin American position on the international rankings.

Latin American and Caribbean universities today

Universities in Latin America and the Caribbean share a common history. Some date back to the European colonies and to the university models in place at the time. With the 1918 Cry of Córdoba, a reform movement began sweeping the region, with autonomy and the social mission of universities as its main tenets. During the 20th Century, the region's universities played an exceptionally important role in the construction of nation states, and in the urbanization and social mobility processes underway in our countries. Universities have also played a fundamental role in preserving democratic values and in promoting a diversity of progressive movements in the region. In keeping with their social mission, they have produced vast numbers of professionals, technicians and scientists, as well as serving as the main centers for knowledge production in sciences and the humanities. Throughout this long history, they have been bastions of knowledge production and dissemination, both at the universal and local level.

Higher education institutions in Latin America and the Caribbean are characterized by ongoing processes of expansion and diversification, in terms of their scope, objectives and missions, as well as the presence of important similarities and differences in the dominant institutional models in place in the region. Over the last decade, the number of students enrolled in higher education rose from approximately 12 million to 20 million. Gross enrollment averages about a third of the age cohort (19-23), although more than a few countries in the region have surpassed the 50%-mark. In terms of total enrollment, about 75% is in universities; with the exception of the technological areas, there is gender parity; and the majority of the student population, including at the postgraduate level, is comprised of students under 30 years old.

In recent years, there has been growing concern over the need to improve the quality and availability of academic programs, the academic profiles of the professors, as well as the

management and administrative environments at institutions. Several countries have implemented accreditation systems for study plans and diverse systems designed to promote transparency and accountability, as well as formulas for improving the preparation and performance of academic staff.

There is also growing interest in developing, improving and consolidating research within universities, as well as strengthening ties among universities, society, and the productive sector. However, in the vast majority of universities in Latin America and the Caribbean, the main priority is teaching, due, in large part, to the historic role of these institutions in educating students from a wide range of social backgrounds.

Over the past five years, Latin American universities have made major strides in exchanging experiences and developing theories on university pedagogy, including hosting seminars and international conferences that are attended not only by higher education experts, but also by professors from all different fields, with a strong transversal and transdisciplinary focus.

Nonetheless, there are more than a few problems and challenges facing our institutions. The majority stem from the shortage of public and private funds needed to promote growth and qualitative development, a deficit which has become chronic.

History of the debate over the international rankings in Latin America

The World Conference on Higher Education (CMES), held in Paris, July 5-9, 2009, recognized the need to obtain more information, openness and transparency with respect to the diverse missions and performances of each teaching establishment. In addition, it set a goal of developing methods for evaluation and quality assurance, as well as fomenting a culture of quality assurance within institutions.

The representatives for Latin America and Caribbean at CEMES-2009 joined the international consensus on the need to promote incentives for evaluation, transparency and accountability as part of universities' social responsibility. In addition, they spoke out against the construction or use of rankings as a means for evaluating the performance of university systems, institutions or programs.

In the Fourth Meeting of University Networks and Rectors' Councils in Latin America and the Caribbean, sponsored by the International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC-UNESCP) in Buenos Aires, Argentina, May 5-6, 2011, the issue of rankings was again discussed, yielding the following resolutions:

1. Ratify the accords from the Regional Conference on Higher Education (Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, June 4-6, 2008) that defined education as a public good.
2. Recognize the growing demand for knowledge of the conditions, characteristics, performance and impact of higher education institutions (HEIs) in each country and in the region as a whole.
3. Manifest their concern for the undesirable effects of the rankings, including:

- The homogenizing impact on institutions with respect to the predominant model of the elite U.S. research institution and the resulting loss of identity to the Latin American university.
 - The biased perception of the way higher education institutions in the region operate, as well as their quality and results, due to incomplete measurements that focus primarily on the international circulation of scientific knowledge production.
 - The impact of these biased perceptions on decision-makers at the national and institutional level.
 - The delegitimization of the national HEIs, in particular those that promote models that differ from that of the research-centered university, and
 - The mistaken tendency to equate rankings with information systems.
4. Propose to the government authorities responsible for coordinating university systems, to university associations and networks, and to the rectors and directors of these institutions, as well as to UNESCO, that they promote alternatives to the rankings in order to achieve a better understanding and evaluation of the reality of higher education. Among such alternatives, the following proposals stand out:
- The construction of information systems focused on the HEIs, that take into account their full range of functions and responsibilities, characteristics, processes, resources and results.
 - The elaboration of systematic, objective and reliable comparative studies designed to aid in the decision-making process.
 - Coordinating common actions to promote the circulation and international recognition of the academic publications and scientific knowledge produced by the HEIs in the region.
 - Reinforce the actions underway by the IESALC in this area, in particular the Map of Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean.

These resolutions were also presented at the *UNESCO Global Forum on Rankings and Accountability in Higher Education: Uses and Misuses*, which was held in Paris, May 16-17, 2011. In these and other meetings held in Mexico City, Bogota and Santo Domingo between 2011 and 2012, there was frequent discussion of the need to hold a regional meeting that would bring together rectors and other university officials from throughout Latin American and the Caribbean with specialists in the topic to analyze the impacts, scope and limits of the international rankings on the region's universities. This proposal became reality with the invitation by the four university rectors who are sponsoring this event, with support from IESALC, the Union of Universities in Latin America (UDUAL) and the National Association of Universities and Higher Education Institutions (ANUIES) in Mexico.

Latin American Universities and the International Rankings: Impact, Scope and Limits

The event drew together rectors and other officials from some 65 universities, both public and private, from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Paraguay, Peru, the Dominican Republic, Venezuela and México, the host country. Speakers included some of the top specialists and the producers of four of the most influential international rankings.

We the undersigned, participants of the conference *Latin American Universities and the International Rankings: Impact, Scope and Limits*, coincide with the characterization of the risks and limits involved in using the rankings as elements in the evaluation and design of public policy, as described by the IESALC meeting in May 2011.

As a result of the ideas exchanged in the meeting, we present the following considerations and proposals:

Considerations and proposals

1. To government authorities and legislative bodies

Considering that:

- a) Over the past decade the international rankings have acquired considerable visibility. That impact primarily due to the fact that a large portion of decision makers and the public view these classification systems as offering an exhaustive and objective measure of the quality of the institutions.
- b) There is a widespread perception that the rankings constitute sources of information that can be used as the basis for comparing and evaluating both individual universities and higher education systems as a whole. The rankings are hierarchical classification systems and not information systems, and therefore do not offer valid criteria for judging the performance of universities, not even when the analysis is restricted to those areas and indicators employed to create the rankings. In no case do they allow for longitudinal comparisons of the improvement or decline of universities over time.
- c) In order to counter this misperception, it is important to identify the rankings' main characteristics and limits. Keeping in mind the origin of the rankings and each one's particular goals, in the best possible scenario, the rankings constitute comparisons of the weighted averages of a limited group of indicators, generally associated with the international circulation of research products. These systems for classifying universities do not take into account the full range of their contributions, nor the performance of each institution as a whole. This fact is particularly relevant in the case of universities in Latin America and the Caribbean, whose responsibilities and functions often transcend the more traditional range of activities of the Anglo-Saxon research universities, which in turn serve as parameters for the rankings.
- d) The bias toward the Anglo-Saxon research university model does not permit universities in the region to compete on an even footing with their counterparts in more economically developed nations. On the one hand, there are the previously

mentioned differences between the university traditions in our countries and those of the United States, the United Kingdom and others that predominate in the rankings. On the other hand, it is necessary to keep in mind that the majority of the rankings rely on the data compiled by the two scientific journal indexes (ISI-Thomson Reuters and SciVerse-SCOPUS), which are produced by companies that primarily track articles in journals published in English and with a focus on health sciences and engineering. The result is a bias against the universities in Latin America and their scientific publications. Finally, there are enormous differences in the amount of investment in higher education and scientific research in different countries, which is the single most important element in determining the presence of institutions in the rankings.

Recommendations:

Given the above considerations, following are our recommendations to government authorities and legislative bodies:

- a. Develop strategic and long-range policies to strengthen universities in the region in accordance with their historic traditions and national development plans, conserving the emphasis on the formative mission of higher education and as a tool to promote inclusion, reduce the inequality gap and, simultaneously, promote economic development.
- b. Encourage the creation of public data bases at the national and regional levels, with information that permits a well-founded knowledge of the systems, subsystems or institutions, facilitates comparative analyses, when possible, and allows for diagnoses of the most relevant problems and opportunities, which are necessary for the design of public policies with long-term impacts.
- c. Avoid using the results of the rankings as elements in evaluating the institutions' performance, in designing higher education policy, in determining the amount of financing for institutions, and in implementing incentives and rewards for institutions and academic personnel.

2. To the rankings producers

Considerations:

- a. There is broad consensus within the academic community regarding the conceptual and methodological limits of the rankings as tools for evaluating higher education institutions. Following are some key issues to be considered:
 - There are no broadly or unanimously accepted criteria for measuring the quality of universities. In that context, any selection of parameters or quantitative indicators to sum up the quality of universities is necessarily arbitrary.
 - The rankings yield results that group a large number of institutions around an average score. The difference in the scores of universities at the bottom of the grouping and those at the top is often so small as to be statistically insignificant.
 - The international rankings tend to evaluate solely or primarily the research-related activities of institutions, minimizing their educational and social functions.

- Among important limitations: an almost exclusive concentration of publications in English, limiting the selection to the most prestigious prizes, and omitting the study or work experience of graduates and the recipients of other types of awards.
 - The fact that the quality of universities throughout the world cannot be compared in a precise manner, given the enormous differences among the types of universities present in different countries.
 - The fact that the results of any ordered classification system or ranking will depend on the choice of indicators, as well as on the weight assigned to each one.
 - The majority of the published rankings do not offer specific data on the universities included. Those that include prestige-related indicators do not tend to include information regarding the statistical validity of the results. For that reason, it is extremely difficult to independently replicate the calculations used in generating the results.
- b. Various multilateral organizations, including UNESCO, the OCDE and the World Bank, have expressed the need to improve the level of transparency, objectivity and methodological rigor of the rankings. They have also underscored the need to revise the design of the rankings to include information on the universities' performance in teaching and cultural dissemination, as well as to reflect the diversity among their missions and institutional goals.
- c. The International Ranking Experts Group (IREG), founded in 2004 under the auspices of UNESCO's European Center for Higher Education (CEPES) and the Institute of Higher Education Policy (IHEP), which bring together academic specialists and producers of the international rankings, approved in their second plenary meeting in Berlin, on May 18-20, 2006, the *Berlin Principles on Ranking of Higher Education Institutions*. The document proposes criteria for guaranteeing quality and best practices in four areas: goals and objectives of the rankings; design and analysis of indicators; data collection and processing; and the presentation of results.

Recommendations:

In virtue of the above, we present the following recommendations to the ranking organizations and producers:

- a. Adhere to the *Berlin Principles on Ranking of Higher Education Institutions*. In particular:
- Recognize institutional diversity, taking into account the different missions and goals of the universities.
 - Provide precise information on the sources consulted in the classification process, as well as on the data provided by each source.
 - Specify the linguistic, cultural, economic and historic contexts of the educational systems being ranked.
 - Guarantee complete transparency with regard to the methodology used in creating the ranking.
 - Measure outputs in preference to inputs where possible.
 - Specify and justify the different weights assigned to the indicators employed, and provide information on any changes in the methodology.
 - Use proven and provable data.
 - Give priority to information that is collected and systematized using proper procedures for scientific data collection.

- Provide consumers with a clear explanation regarding all the elements used in creating the ranking.
- Compile results in such a form as to eliminate or reduce errors in the original data, and establish procedures that allow for correcting any errors detected after the publication of the results.
- b. Consider including in the quality indicators the following activities and attributes:
 - a) Innovation and didactic tools/ hours of specialized teacher training undergone by professors/ number of professors who have completed postgraduate programs or courses in higher education and/or advanced didactic training.
 - b) Public accounting activities / public intervention, arbitration, knowledge transfer, evaluation of public projects and audits of institutional quality and/or the methodological rigor of public institutions.
 - c) Applied research projects and/or technological innovations that promote multiparty management of local development initiatives, or result in value added or improved economic competitiveness at the national and regional level.
- c. Expand and deepen relationships with the institutional offices responsible for producing statistical information at each university. Make use of these channels to:
 - Obtain the institutions' express authorization to be included in the rankings.
 - Establish as a guiding principle that only information that is corroborated by the institutions can be used in the rankings.
 - Include in the publication of the results any clarification or precautionary note provided by the institutions regarding the validity of the data.
 - Interact systematically with the institutions to improve the rankings. In particular, move forward in incorporating relevant data on teaching, cultural dissemination and social services.
- d. Host periodic regional and international forums for debate on the rankings, bringing together institutions, the academic community and specialists interested in discussing the methods, data and indicators employed in the classification systems, with the goal of contributing to the systematic improvement of the rankings.
- e. Provide timely information on any changes in the ranking methodology, such as the weighting of indicators, the inclusion of new data, or a change in the sources, as well as any other modifications that could affect the results.

3. To the media and to the public affairs and communication offices of the higher education institutions

Considerations:

- a. The rankings have become an important news item at both the national and international level. In fact, in some cases, their very existence depends on the interest and earnings generated by the media, and in particular, on their appearance in print and online news outlets.
- b. In general, the media coverage of the rankings tends to bolster the misperception that they constitute a complete picture of the quality of the institutions. The news coverage tends to

- focus on the most competitive qualities among universities and, occasionally, on the changes in the order of the universities among different editions of a particular ranking.
- c. Only in rare cases do the media provide information on the scope and specific focus of each one of the rankings, as well as on the methodological approach, on what and how they measure, on the statistical biases and on the substantive differences among universities present in each classification. It is also unusual for them to provide information on the diversity of the rankings or the position of one or more institutions in different rankings.
 - d. In general, the public receives news several times a year on the position of universities familiar to them in one part of the world or another, depending on the ranking. In almost all cases, the public's understanding of the rankings is reduced to the fact that such and such a university is included or not among the best in the world. The result is a tendency in which people form snap judgments, based on superficial information on one or various national or international institutions.
 - e. One of the most significant negative effects of the rankings is the loss of legitimacy for those institutions that do not appear in the rankings, are ranked very low or descend in the hierarchy from one year to another.

Recommendations:

In light of the above, we suggest:

- a. One of the main roles of universities is to contribute to the analysis and understanding of diverse societal phenomena. For that reason, institutions should make use of the media to provide society with elements that permit a better understanding of the motivations behind the rankings, of the characteristics of each one, and of their objectives, scope and limits.
- b. We urge the media to provide a more balanced, subtle and informed coverage of the rankings. Ideally, the journalistic report would take advantage of the widespread interest in the topic to provide a more skilled explanation of the limits and significance of each of the rankings.
- c. In order to support the media in covering the rankings, we recommend that the universities' communications offices establish closer relations with the different media organizations.

4. To the higher education institutions in Latin America and the Caribbean

Considerations:

- a. There is a strong and identifiable university tradition in our region, which has produced a wide variety of universities and higher education projects.
- b. Within this diversity, there is a common tendency to consider among the main university functions of teaching, research, cultural dissemination, extension programs and university-industry collaboration, the strong social commitment to the development of our nations.
- c. Many of these characteristics, as well as the contributions and production of universities, are not taken into account by the rankings in general, and the international rankings in particular.

Recommendations:

In light of the above, we offer the following recommendations:

- a. Higher education institutions in the region, while maintaining full respect for their institutional autonomy, should generate and consolidate policies that promote transparency, accountability and open access to their scholarly production, resources, materials and services generated through their diverse institutional areas: teaching, research, cultural dissemination, extension, collaboration with industry, and social service.
- b. This goal of providing complete, unrestricted access should become a strategic policy that fulfills the social responsibility that has characterized our institutions, as well as serving as a means for increasing the international visibility, cooperation and the academic and social impact our work. Finally, it should serve as a vehicle for amplifying the university's social impact. The only limits to this openness should be in the form of protecting copyright and personal information.

Final message

Our universities and higher education institutions in Latin America and the Caribbean face major challenges. This has been a constant throughout the long history of our countries and universities. Given that we have the obligation to take part in knowledge production and professional formation, both on a national and international level, our institutions must undergo continuous transformations in order to align ourselves with the rapid changes underway on a global scale.

At the same time, we are responsible for conserving our national and regional roots, for recreating the best traditions of our universities, for preserving and promoting our languages, for giving a new dimension and visibility to the knowledge we produce, and for strengthening the study, reflection and analysis of our histories, cultures and the conditions under which our nations have developed. All that, in the face of the ancestral problems of poverty and inequality, which continue to plague our nations.

In this double process of international integration and strengthening of our presence at a national and regional level, we must find strength in the elements that have made our institutions strong and relevant. We must make clear the relationship between our universities and the construction of our societies, states and national development strategies. It is with every greater clarity and creativity that we must embrace the historic responsibilities of our universities in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Our universities must not fall for the false dichotomy between preparing professionals for the labor market and forming leaders for change, which closely resembles the other fallacious choice, between generalists and specialists. We know that complexity isolates and neutralizes the super-specialists, who lack general training, but it also rewards those who combine high-level professional training and capacity to innovate with a transdisciplinary approach, a focus which often leads to the greatest strategic decisions. Latin America and the Caribbean are in the vanguard in the production of knowledge that promotes inclusion, social justice, peaceful conflict resolution, environmental protection, economic and social development, respect for diversity and the promotion of human rights.

We understand the importance of comparisons and measurements at an international level, but we cannot sacrifice our fundamental responsibilities in order to implement superficial strategies designed to improve our standings in the rankings. We are continuously seeking relationships, exchanges and the mutual enrichment of our academic work through the interaction with universities throughout the world. We also hope to increase the visibility and international impact of our work and contributions to quality assurance, in order to generate parameters for reflecting on the quality of higher education institutions throughout the world.