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Latin Americans challenge international rankings

María Elena Hurtado 30 May 2012 Issue No: 224

Latin American countries met for the first-ever regional meeting on the impact, scope and limits of international university rankings and declared that they would not use ranking results to assess the performance of national universities, design higher education policy or determine financing.

The two-day meeting, held in Mexico City in mid-May, welcomed rectors and senior officials from 65 universities across 14 Latin American countries, as well as editors of the four most influential world university classification systems.

Participants focused on the undesirable effects of rankings for universities in the region, and proposed changes.

"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," reads the final declaration.

It adds that the systems for classifying universities take into account neither the full range of universities' contributions, nor their overall performance.

According to the Academic Ranking of World Universities, conducted by the Centre for World-Class Universities at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, only 11 of the world's top 500 universities – 2.2% – are found in Latin America, home to 8.5% of the world's population.

Only three universities from the region make the top 400 universities in the *Times Higher Education* World University Ranking.

Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) Rector José Narro, whose university hosted the conference, emphasised that "higher education institutions in Latin America are not against the rankings. But we want them to take into account our reality."

The declaration points out that most rankings follow the Anglo-Saxon research university model and use the Thomson Reuters and SciVerse-SCOPUS databases, which

primarily track articles in English journals on sciences and engineering.

By contrast, Latin American higher education institutions are strong on social sciences and humanities, they mostly publish their work in Spanish or Portuguese, and they have been a motor for social mobility, said Imanol Ordorika, UNAM's director-general of institutional evaluation and the meeting coordinator.

The final declaration asks ranking organisations to take into account missions and goals of universities in the region and to consider including in the quality indicators additional factors, such as number of professors with postgraduate studies, and projects that improve economic competitiveness.

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