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Educators Debate Negative Effects of International Rankings on Latin American Universities

By Steven Ambrus

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The limitations of international higher-education rankings and their negative effect on universities in Latin America were key themes of a two-day conference held here at the National Autonomous University of Mexico.

The conference, "Latin American Universities and the International Rankings: Impact, Scope, and Limits," brought together 74 leaders of public and private universities from around Latin America, as well as representatives from some of the world's principal organizations that rank institutions of higher learning.

The conference focused largely on the negative consequences that comparisons based on global rankings can have on Latin American universities, especially when used by the news media and governments to evaluate a university's overall performance. Participants said such a focus could affect not only universities' ability to attract students but also the public financing they receive.

Imanol Ordorika, the academic coordinator of the conference and director general of institutional evaluation at the National Autonomous University, recalled how several years ago his university found itself in an adversarial relationship with Mexico's Congress. The fact that the institution had a relatively high position in international rankings at the time played a significant role in keeping its financing at healthy levels.

"The problem is that when you go down in the rankings, the media can be critical, and policy makers view you negatively," he said. That is the case, he said, even when a drop in the rankings has nothing to do with performance but rather a change in the ranking's methodology or other universities' improvement in weighted indicators.

Latin America has fared poorly in the global rankings. Though 8.5 percent of the world's people live in the region, only 11 of the world's top 500 universities—2.2 percent—are in Latin America, according to the most recent edition of Shanghai Jiao Tong University's closely watched Academic Ranking of World Universities. Only three universities from the region—the University of São Paulo,

the State University of Campinas, in Brazil, and the Catholic University of Chile—make the top 400 universities in the *Times Higher Education* ranking, with the University of São Paulo placing highest, at 178.

Participants at the meeting here said that less-than-impressive showing was a reflection of the rankings' bias toward elite universities in the English-speaking world, which have lots of money to spend on natural sciences, medicine, and engineering.

Most of the rankings, they pointed out, give a great weight to the number of publications and citations in bibliographical databases like the Thomson Reuters Web of Knowledge and SciVerse Scopus, where English-language articles in science dominate, or, in the case of the Shanghai ranking, to the number of Nobel Prizes awarded to alumni and faculty.

But that methodology neglects the strengths of many Latin American universities in teaching, the social sciences, and the humanities, and in the training of future government leaders and the development of national institutions and culture, they said.

Rankings could also affect a university's core mission in reducing inequality and poverty. The Federal University of ABC, in the state of São Paulo, for example, was founded in 2006 with a mission to help lower- and middle-income students from Brazil's academically weak public schools gain access to higher education. The university reserves half its places for such students and spends much of its budget on scholarships for them.

But there is talk now in Brazil's federal system of using rankings as a criterion for government financing, and the university's rector, Helio Waldman, is nervous. "Because we are committed to social inclusion, as well as academic excellence, we have to be less selective and spend less money on scientific research in favor of scholarships. If we are forced to emphasize our positions in the rankings, we might have to sacrifice that commitment."

Phil Baty, editor of the rankings for *Times Higher Education*, said readers of the rankings should keep in mind that *The Times* was looking at a particular type of institution. It would be a mistake, he said, for governments to not look at broader sets of data. "It wouldn't be appropriate for an extremely large, regional, teaching-focused university to be ranked with a set of criteria that are really designed for the globally competitive, research-intensive ones. You have to examine in detail what the indicators are and what they really show and draw on a wider range of materials in making decisions."

Nonetheless, global rankings can "hypnotize" policy makers in developing nations and make them forget that the rankings favor universities from wealthy countries with the resources to do high-end research in science, said Simon Marginson, a professor of higher education at the University of

Melbourne. That is a mistake, he said. For those nations without fully industrialized economies, rankings do not provide a competition based on merit.

"Until a nation has the economic capacity to sustain a broad scientific infrastructure, it should use regional rankings and local benchmarks to drive improvement. Not global rankings," he said.

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