



Universities demand full transparency university rankings

May 25, 2012 — Paul Wouters

Last week, I attended a two day conference of the rectors of 65 Latin American universities about global university rankings in Mexico City. The meeting concluded by adopting a “Final Declaration” signed by the majority of attending universities. At times, it was a debate in which the emotions ran high. Clearly, many universities leaders had the feeling that they were badly served by most global university rankings. In this, they were supported by the keynote speaker, [Simon Marginson](#), a higher education expert from the University of Melbourne (Australia). He held an excellent speech in which he showed how most rankings are based on a particular model of higher education as a globalized market. In this framework US universities are dominant. Many rectors were of the opinion that the social mission of the Latin American universities will not be valued in this model. Moreover, performance at the international research front is dominant in most rankings, including in our [Leiden Ranking](#). Latin American universities do not score high, if they make it to the ranking at all.

The meeting was organized by [Imanol Ordorika](#), director of institutional evaluation of the [National Autonomous University of Mexico](#). A former leader of the 1968 student demonstrations, he is focused both on international research (in the field of higher education) and on the social role of the universities. The countries in Latin America are confronted with high levels of corruption, enormous economic and social inequalities, and the need for much better mass education. Although these universities are huge (UNAM has more than 300 thousand students), they still cannot accomodate all young people who aspire to study. Approximately one-fifth of Latin America’s youth neither studies nor works. No wonder that university rectors not only worry about their international research effort, but at least as much or more about their role in improving the educational system in their countries.

Against this background, the well-known deficiencies of many global university rankings are even more urgent. This was also the reason to organize the conference. Increasingly, universities that score low or not at all in the rankings – such as the [Times Higher Education World University Rankings](#), the [QS World University Rankings](#), or the [Academic Ranking of World Universities \(the Shanghai Ranking\)](#), or the [Ranking Web of World Universities](#) – are questioned about their performance. According to the declaration adopted at the conference, the current rankings have many undesirable effects, such as a homogenizing impact in which the elite US based research university is dominant, a bias in the perception of the performance of Latin American universities, an undermining of the

legitimacy of the national higher education institutions, and the mistaken tendency to see rankings as information systems.

Key problems in the global rankings discussed were: the arbitrary way in which different indicators are combined into one composite indicator; the lack of visibility of the humanities and social sciences; the neglect of the social and cultural impact of the universities; and last but not least the lack of transparency of both methods and data that are used to calculate the indicators. The Leiden Ranking was praised for its transparency and its focus, as was the [SCImago Ranking](#). It was seen as helpful that these rankings make very explicit what they measure and what they do not measure. Of course, these rankings do not enable to compare the universities social mission. For this other measures are needed.

The "Final Declaration" demanded that governments in Latin America avoid using the rankings as elements in evaluating the universities performance. They were also advised to encourage the creation of public databases that permits a well-founded knowledge of the performance of the higher education system. The ranking producers were called upon to adhere to the 2006 "Berlin Principles on Ranking of Higher Education Institutions". Rankings should be 100% transparent. Ranking producers should also engage in more interaction with the universities. The declaration notes that there is currently no consensus on criteria for measuring the quality of universities. "Any selection of parameters or quantitative indicators to sum up the qualities of universities is rather arbitrary". The media are admonished to provide a more balanced coverage of the rankings. And the universities in Latin America are encouraged to adopt policies that promote transparency, accountability and open access. Rankings can play a role here. However, universities should not sacrifice "our fundamental responsibilities" in order to implement "superficial strategies designed to improve our standings in the rankings".

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