

Rethinking Institutional Strategies for Latin American Universities

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The influence of university rankings is stronger than ever. Whether we like it or not, rankings are a powerful tool to heighten prestige and legitimacy and there is no doubt that for highly ranked universities it is easier to attract thousands of students willing to pay exorbitant sums of money in tuition fees and accommodation expenditures. Despite all controversy and methodological shortcomings, university rankings are commonly used by millions of students around the world to select the best universities and academic programs. The influence of rankings among students translates into profitable opportunities for some institutions, but for most universities, rankings have become a pernicious reality.

The Ranking Game: To Play or Not to Play, That Is the Question

Several studies show that rankings are powerful tools that universities use in order to build or maintain an international reputation as centers of academic excellence. But the truth is that building a reputation through rankings is something reserved only for a select group of institutions. We must accept that under the current rules of the ranking game, it will be very unlikely for most Latin American (LATAM) universities to become globally prominent, since worldwide competition at the institutional level is fierce and very expensive.

For LATAM universities, the lack of financial resources is not their only disadvantage. Their institutional orientation and organizational models are important factors that play against them. Most LATAM universities tend to favor teaching over research production, and rankings, whether we like it or not, are all about research productivity. But having an organizational model unfit to play the ranking game is not the only handicap of LATAM universities; when it comes to rankings, they also lack the support of their national governments. Countries such as China, France, Germany, or Russia have improved the performance of their universities in rankings by making the ranking game a matter of national priority. These countries have developed initiatives in order to promote changes in the governance schemes of their universities and allocated additional funds to institutions according to their positions in rankings.

In the 2019 edition of the *Times Higher Education (THE) World University Ranking*, there was not a single Latin American university among the top 200. Among all LATAM universities participating, only one made it to the top 300 (the University of São Paulo), and to be honest, being ranked 300 is not impressive. One could almost ask if universities in the region should just forget about rankings. Is it game over for LATAM universities when it comes to rankings? The answer might be both *yes* and *no*.

Rankings are one of the most influential forces of higher education, and LATAM institutions cannot afford to just step back from them, since rankings play a key role in shaping perceptions about the quality and legitimacy of universities around the world. But rather than trying to gain prestige through competing in rankings, LATAM universities may have better chances to increase their international appeal by focusing on specific niches or academic subjects.

Focusing on Subjects

Positioning LATAM institutions among the top 100 of world university rankings is not very likely to happen in the near future. Universities listed among the top 100 of rankings like *THE* or *QS* have at their disposal annual budgets that range between US\$3 to

Abstract

Latin American (LATAM) universities rank low in the most influential rankings, which makes them internationally invisible. Competition in rankings requires vast resources. Focusing on niche specializations and specific subjects may be a better alternative to gain legitimacy and boost the attractiveness of LATAM universities, and may facilitate partnerships with better-ranked universities, increasing their international prestige.

When competing within specific programs or subjects, LATAM universities can become quite competitive.

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4 billion dollars, making it almost impossible for non-world-class universities to compete against them. But within specific programs or subjects, LATAM universities can become quite competitive. In 2019, the Metropolitan Autonomous University, located in Mexico, obtained the position 801+ in the *THE* ranking. But in the *THE* clinical, preclinical, and health subject ranking, it ranked in position 176. The University of Brasília offers another example of the benefits of focusing on specific subjects. While ranking in the segment 801+ of the *THE* ranking 2019, it ranked among the best 400 in the clinical, pre-clinical, and health subject ranking. These two institutions possess academic strength within particular subjects, as do many universities in the region.

One could argue that focusing on specific academic areas of strength is a more efficient and realistic strategy to increase the international visibility of LATAM universities and allow them to compete against similar programs offered by overall better-ranked institutions. By focusing on niche specializations, they would find that there are less restrictions to partner with renowned institutions and formalize joint research projects, and offer courses and double-degree programs that increase their international attractiveness. This strategy may be the new name of the game for LATAM universities. ▲