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# Global Rankings and the Geopolitics of Higher Education

*Understanding the influence and impact of rankings on higher education, policy and society*

Edited by Ellen Hazelkorn

First published 2017  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*  
Names: Hazelkorn, Ellen, editor.

Title: Global rankings and the geopolitics of higher education : understanding the influence and impact of rankings on higher education, policy and society / edited by Ellen Hazelkorn.

Description: New York, NY : Routledge, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016020505 | ISBN 9781138828117 (hbk : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781315738550 (ebk)

Subjects: LCSH: Universities and colleges—Ratings and rankings—Cross-cultural studies. | Higher education and state—Cross-cultural studies. | Comparative education—Cross-cultural studies.

Classification: LCC LB2331.62 .G564 2016 | DDC 378—dc23  
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016020505>

ISBN: 978-1-138-82811-7 (hbk)  
ISBN: 978-1-315-73855-0 (ebk)

Typeset in Minion  
by Book Now Ltd, London

Printed and bound in the United States of America by  
Edwards Brothers Malloy on sustainably sourced paper

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## Latin American higher education, universities and worldwide rankings

### *The new conquest?*

ALMA MALDONADO-MALDONADO AND  
CHRISTIAN CORTES<sup>1</sup>

#### The global fear of the word 'ranking'

The initial draft of the final communiqué of the World Conference on Higher Education organised by the UNESCO in 2009 stated that:

Globalization has also increased the pressure to make comparisons between higher education institutions, resulting in the emergence of international rankings. Such comparisons should promote institutional diversity by including a range of criteria that reflect the variety of goals and purposes of different systems, institutions, and institution types ...

(Maldonado-Maldonado and Verger 2010, 8)

Not taking into consideration the actual influence of international rankings, it was clear six years ago that the world was facing a new threat: worldwide rankings. The interesting aspect of this is that in the end, the final communiqué did not include such a phrase and instead it points out: '[c]omparisons, in order to be useful, must be based on quality data and appropriate analysis reflecting the diversity of systems and institutional missions' (Maldonado and Verger 2010, 8). Evidently, the word 'ranking' included in the original draft disappeared in the final document. According to two observers of the drafting process: 'The Indian representative strongly and repeatedly requested elimination of the ranking concept from the communiqué' (Maldonado and Verger 2010, 8). In reality, these objections were never clarified. Apparently, the Indians and other emerging economy countries were uncomfortable with the word 'rankings'. The question is: are they still uncomfortable with the idea of rankings and, if so, why? By eliminating the word 'ranking' and using 'comparison' instead, the World Conference pretended to diminish the role of international rankings in many ways. Six years after this conference, it is now evident that in order to diminish the role of worldwide rankings it is going to take much more than simply erasing the word from its final communiqué.

#### Reality check for Latin America

The picture painted in terms of the situation of the Latin American universities in the worldwide rankings may seem depressing. While Latin America represents about almost 12 per cent of the total tertiary enrolments in the world (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2015), its appearances in the worldwide rankings are almost non-existent. The presence of Latin American higher education institutions (HEIs) in the period 2015–2016 goes from about 2 per cent in the *Academic Ranking of World University (ARWU)*, 2.9 per cent in the *US News and World Review Best Global Universities Ranking*, less than 4 per cent in the *Times Higher Education World University Ranking (THE)*, to 6.7 per cent in the *QS World University Ranking (QS)*.

Most rankings should be analysed very carefully because they have many methodological problems; they are extremely controversial and they are not necessarily measuring the same things. It is important to understand who the major players in terms of rankings in Latin America are, how these rankings have been used and which universities are playing key roles in such comparisons. There are approximately eighteen Latin American universities present in worldwide rankings; however, only ten of them are always present across all rankings. Five out of these ten HEIs are from Brazil. For the elaboration of this chapter, we reviewed the most current results of fifteen rankings (most of them from 2015): six global and nine national.<sup>2</sup> However, there are rankings such as the *THE*, the *Center for World University Ranking (CWUR)*, the *ARWU* and the *QS* that include several tables and classifications based on subjects, regions or different indicators. Therefore, the total number of separate rankings we consulted for this chapter was seventy-five.

The Latin American giant is the University of São Paulo (Universidade de São Paulo, USP), a Brazilian public university. USP is first for Latin America in thirty-one tables in different rankings reviewed. In second position is the National Autonomous University of Mexico (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, UNAM), a Mexican public institution. UNAM is first in the region in fifteen worldwide tables. In third position is the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile (Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile) a Chilean private university, which is first in eight tables. The University of Buenos Aires (UBA), an Argentinean public university, follows. UBA is first in three tables. The Instituto Tecnológico de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey (ITESM), a Mexican private institution, is first in two tables. And the State University of Campinas (Universidade Estadual de Campinas), a Brazilian public university, is first in one table. In four tables there are no Latin American universities.

Other Latin American HEIs with important presence in the international rankings are: the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro), a Brazilian public institution; the São Paulo State University (Universidade Estadual Paulista 'Júlio de Mesquita Filho'), a Brazilian public university; the University of Minas Gerais (Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais),

a Brazilian public university; the University of Chile (Universidad de Chile), a Chilean public university; and the University of the Andes (Universidad de los Andes), a Colombian private institution.

Obviously each table should be handled very carefully; the *THE* Subject Ranking 2015–2016 in life sciences only includes the top-100 in the world. In this table no Latin American HEI was included this year. This table cannot be considered similar to the QS Ranking by Faculty in 2015 for Life Sciences and Medicine which includes the top-400 in the world, and the USP is number 100 (the top position among Latin American HEIs). Another important consideration is that most Latin American universities that are included in worldwide rankings hold very marginal positions; only in the *Webometrics* ranking, which basically analyses the website access, presence and impact, does USP appear in the top-fifty of the world. In the rest of the rankings Latin American HEIs are in lower positions of the rankings.

The national rankings consulted (nine in this case) confirm the same tendencies; the top university in each country is more or less the same as mentioned above. In the search we conducted, we found that only Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Mexico have developed national rankings and, except for the Colombian ranking (MIDE), which has been produced by a governmental agency, most of them belong to major newspapers or magazines.

It is not possible to analyse with all the necessary details the ranking's positions of Latin American universities but what is presented provides a good idea about where most Latin American universities sit in terms of the rankings, and who are the main players in the region.

#### A main purpose of the international rankings: Where should I go to study abroad?

The first multi-indicator ranking of world universities was the *ARWU*, published in June 2003 and then updated annually. Although the initial purpose of this ranking was to find out how many Chinese universities were eligible to be considered 'World-class Universities', later on, the impact of the ranking went beyond that first goal (Liu and Cheng 2011, 147). Even when the current influence of the international rankings is recognised, distinguishing the concrete ways in which the rankings are shaping policies is more complicated. Hazelkorn (2011) mentions that there is evidence in some budget increases, legal recognition of degrees granted by universities within the rankings, accelerating collaboration processes among HEIs and also scholarships granted to students who have been admitted to only highly ranked universities (Hazelkorn 2011, 508–509). After searching in different countries in terms of what has been the most influential aspect of international rankings in Latin America, there are indications which can lead us to believe that one of the most important is that it substantially shapes the decisions concerning scholarships granted. The following are seven examples of the latter situation:

- 1 The Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior, CAPES) from the Brazilian Ministry of Education recently conducted a review to find out how many of the students who received a scholarship under the programme 'Science without borders' [*Ciência sem Fronteiras*] are studying at one of the top-100 universities in the *THE* ranking. According to a table released in October 2014, there were 5,425 Brazilian students who were granted one of these scholarships and were studying at a ranked university. This number represents only 13.8 per cent of the participants in the programme. CAPES mentions that one goal is to increase this number in the near future (Cauê Fabiano 2014).
- 2 The National Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT) in Mexico points out that they offer scholarships abroad to any 'prestigious' international HEI. CONACYT clarifies its preference for supporting institutions or programmes that are part of the *THE* ranking, or other local rankings published by each country (CONACYT 2014, 2015).
- 3 The Administrative Department of Science, Technology and Innovation in Colombia (also known as *Colciencias*) has defined as a top-level academic programme any programme included in the top-500 of the *ARWU* 2015. It is a requirement for any student looking to obtain a PhD scholarship to study at a university appearing on this list (COLCIENCIAS 2015).
- 4 In Peru, the National Council of Science and Technology (CONCYTEC) is subsidizing one hundred per cent of the scholarships to study PhD's abroad in the most prestigious universities in the world in order to develop the professional capacities of scientific research and technological development. Some of the requirements are: to hold a Peruvian passport, to be less than thirty-five years old, to have graduated from a Peruvian university, to have been accepted in one of the top-150 universities and the top-fifty in each specialty in one of the following areas: sciences, engineering, management and/or information and communication technology (ICT) policies. The rankings they are asking to be considered are *QS*, *ARWU* and *THE* (CONCYTEC 2015).
- 5 The Chilean National Commission of Scientific and Technological Research offers PhD scholarships abroad. One basic requirement is being accepted in one of the top-100 of the *Web of Science* or in one of the top-fifty of the *THE* or *ARWU* rankings (Innovacion.cl 2015).
- 6 Paraguay's Ministry of Finance, together with the Education and Culture Ministry, the National Council of Science and Technology and the Technical Secretary of Economic and Social Development Planning established a programme of scholarships named National Scholarships programmes abroad: 'Don Carlos Antonio López' (Secretaría Técnica de Planificación 2015). These scholarships offer places to study a Master's or a PhD degree in one of the top-300 universities in the

following rankings: *ARWU*, *QS* and *THE*, and/or in excellent research centres abroad defined by the officials involved (unfortunately the website does not provide further information about this).

- 7 The *HonduFuturo*, a Honduran non-profit organisation which supports the socio-economic development and competence of the country, has pointed out that in order to decide the beneficiaries of scholarships sponsored by them, they will be using the rankings' results, publications and internet pages among others. *HonduFuturo* (2015) defines the prestige of an international graduate programme based on the rankings and determines that if a programme is among the top-ten, it deserves their full support.

It is really challenging to find specific examples on how the rankings are shaping current policies in the region nowadays. Nonetheless, one of the most concrete is the way worldwide rankings and tables have been used for the governmental agencies to decide where to send their sponsored students to obtain a degree in the Latin American region. Another example is the use of the rankings' role in building prestige, as will be discussed in the next section.

### Buying prestige?

According to authors such as Altbach (2013) 'the QS World University Rankings are the most problematical' among the different worldwide rankings. At the beginning, this ranking was published in collaboration with the *Times Higher Education*. Now each of them publishes their own rankings. Altbach points out: 'whether the QS rankings should be taken seriously by the higher education community is questionable' (2013, 85–86). However, QS is also the ranking which includes more HEIs in developing countries. The QS ranking is considered to be one of the most volatile rankings in today's market. So, the paradox has to do with being the most volatile and questionable ranking yet the most popular among developing countries; why is that? The fact that the QS ranking allows for more institutions to participate and to pay for consultations in order to improve positions within the rankings is an interesting incentive for HEIs which traditionally are not part of any international league. One pending question is to what extent there is a conflict of interest when institutions pay for consultations in order to improve positions in the ranking.

Another criticism of the QS ranking has been pointed out by Marginson (quoted in Hare 2013) who calls it 'the bad social science at the base of multi-indicator rankings'. He said:

we are universities; it is not hard for us to say what is good science and what is bad. We need to push at bad ranking methods or at least weaken their legitimacy [...] There is scope for manipulation in conversations between the universities and the rankers.

The practice of selling consultancy is not uncommon. After all, most of these rankings are developed by private entities. Nevertheless, it is problematic. In an interview, the president of the University of Córdoba, Francisco Tamarit, mentions that he received a letter from 'a business in Singapore' offering an evaluation service which pointed out: 'if you pay approximately USD 33,600 [EUR 29,500] in one payment of USD 10,000 [EUR 8,800] and the rest in six more payments during the course of three years' they would provide a person to collect your data and help you climb positions in terms of your own ranking. 'There is a kind of extortion here, although legally it may not be an extortion'. Presumably, the president was referring to the QS Ranking (La Mañana de Córdoba 2015). It is interesting how in the interview the Tamarit mentions Singapore, since QS is an English ranking, but later on in the interview the newspaper mentioned he was talking about QS (Cba24n 2015).

The QS ranking offers a system to audit HEIs in order to provide them with the advantages necessary to scale positions in the ranking. The price is USD 30,400 [EUR 27,600] for three years. When an institution decides to hire this QS service they are able not only to climb in their ranking position but they can also use the QS graphs and logos. Table 9.1 presents the Latin American HEIs that apparently have paid for this service.

Some of these universities will never have a chance to become part of one of the other international worldwide rankings. In fact, most of these institutions are not in the top-five within their countries (with some exceptions); nonetheless, the QS ranking provides the visibility that they would not have otherwise obtained. It is interesting to notice that the majority of the universities with QS stars are Mexican (ten), another six are from Peru and Brazil (three each), six more are from Chile, Colombia and Ecuador (two each), and only one each in Argentina and Honduras.

In the case of the ITESM, it is the only institution that holds five stars among Latin American universities. In the year 2014, the ITESM overpassed UNAM in the Latin American QS ranking for the first time in its history. But the inconsistencies were quite evident. In the general QS ranking for that year, UNAM appears as the number-one Mexican HEI (ranked 173rd), while the ITESM (Monterrey Tech) is ranked at 274. Meanwhile, in the *QS Latin American Ranking*, the ITESM is ranked seventh, while UNAM is ranked eighth. Monterrey Tech shows off its improvement in the ranking, without mentioning the star system: 'we advanced every year since 2011, we have advanced in this ranking constantly' (Tecnológico de Monterrey 2014). Contrastingly enough, UNAM's president mentioned the following in a public (and visibly uncomfortable) statement: 'this is a ranking that has several mistakes which we have mentioned before ... I am not going to say more about this' (Rivera 2014). According to a QS speaker, the Mexican, Argentinean and Colombian Universities are important in specific areas, but they currently do not have the integral coherence of Brazil and Chile's main institutions. The high number of students per school may be a problem for several of the public research institutions, considering

Table 9.1 Latin American HEIs with QS stars

HEI	Country	Number of QS stars
Universidad Argentina de la Empresa (UADE)	Argentina	3
Centro Universitário Ritter dos Reis (UniRitter)	Brazil	3
UNESP	Brazil	4
Universidade Anhembi Morumbi	Brazil	3
Universidad de las Américas Chile (UDLA)	Chile	2
Universidad Andrés Bello	Chile	4
Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana	Colombia	3
Universidad de Medellín	Colombia	2
Universidad Católica de Santiago de Guayaquil	Ecuador	2
Universidad de Las Américas Ecuador	Ecuador	3
Universidad Tecnológica Centroamericana (UNITEC) – Honduras	Honduras	3
Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey	Mexico	5
Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo Leon (UANL)	Mexico	3
Universidad Autónoma de Campeche (UAC)	Mexico	2
Universidad Autónoma de Coahuila (UA de C)	Mexico	2
Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo (UAEH)	Mexico	3
Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México (UAEMex)	Mexico	3
Universidad Tecnológica de México (UNITEC)	Mexico	3
Universidad de Monterrey (UDEM)	Mexico	3
Universidad de las Américas Puebla (UDLAP)	Mexico	4
Universidad del Valle de México (UVM)	Mexico	3
Universidad Peruana de Ciencias Aplicadas	Peru	3
Universidad Privada del Norte	Peru	2
Universidad San Ignacio de Loyola	Peru	3

Source: QS Top Universities (2015).

that one indicator in the QS ranking is the student-to-faculty ratio (El Litoral 2014). Again, this QS speaker failed to mention what the role played by the QS stars is in the evaluation of their ranking.

Hebe (2013) considers that HEIs do not care about the critiques of the QS ranking. Instead, what apparently matters is that it provides global visibility that contributes to establish international student mobility agreements.

She mentions that, in the interviews with Latin American administrative staff and stakeholders, they mentioned neither the *ARWU* nor *THE*, since their positions in such rankings are not favourable.

An Argentinean newspaper says: 'According to an international study, UBA is the best university in Ibero-America'. They were referring to the QS ranking and to UBA's 124th position in 2014. The newspaper describes QS as an 'independent consulting firm' (La Nación 2015). It is fascinating to notice that UBA went up seventy-four positions that year with regard to last year. According to UBA's administrative staff the reason for this big leap had to do with some adjustments made such as asking UBA's professors to sign articles using the university affiliation and not only the Argentinean National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET), UBA recommended other universities in the country to follow the same initiative, since in 2014 no other Argentinean university was included in the top-ten in the QS ranking (Diario Norte 2015; Clarín 2015). UBA's president said: 'the results obtained in the QS Ranking, together with Shanghai's results [*ARWU*], show that our university keeps maintaining a lot of international prestige' (La Nación 2015).

Another case is the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, which in year 2014 was number one in the *QS Latin American Ranking*. They were very proud they had been finally able to overtake the University of São Paulo. The president of the university stated the following:

These are great news for the country, the effect that our leadership in Latin America may imply attracting professors, students, researchers (projects) [...] I would like to thank the university community: professors, researchers, professionals, administrative staff, undergraduate and graduate students for all their hard work.

(Saffie 2014)

The National University of Colombia listed their progress in the rankings saying that 'in 2008 we were in the 500th position in Webometrics and now we are in the 413th; we were in the 551–600 range in the QS and we are today in the 451' (Suárez 2015). These leaps were explained in the first case by what the Vice-Rector office of research and the National Direction of Informatics and Communications did in terms of modifying the way the university's websites were presented. The president points out that 'we are preparing a draft to let the university community know that they need to use a unique name to refer to the University' (Moisés Wasserman in Suárez 2015). The president also referred to the need to unify the way professors present their affiliation in order to maintain only one name (Suárez 2015).

But QS has been used as a marketing tool also by governments, and not just by universities. For instance, in a recent strategy to attract international students, the Mexican government has created a website called *Why I should study in Mexico?* (Secretaría de Educación Pública 2015). On this webpage the

government is actually using the QS results to promote the prestige of Mexican HEIs (Cortes 2015). Be that as it may, Mexico is not the only country using the QS ranking as a way to promote its HEIs.

Another problem that has been mentioned regarding the QS ranking has to do with buying directories listing contact details for academics and inviting universities to submit names, as denounced by Redden (2013). Naturally, it does not mean that other university rankings are less problematic or do not have a conflict of interests. Nevertheless, the problems with the QS is that it means the only chance for most Latin American universities to appear in worldwide tables despite the fact that it is a volatile ranking. A volatile ranking means a ranking with a constant variation and drastic changes in the university's positions which normally corresponds to methodological changes (Longden 2011). In some cases, these differences occur within the rankings of the same business or institution. For example, the top Latin American university in the QS general ranking is UBA but in the Latin American QS ranking first is USP. This shows important inconsistencies in this ranking. According to Roberts and Thompson (2007), the rankings developers have a particular interest in the market and since the market is generally speaking dynamic, the changes are beneficial in terms of allowing the inclusion of new costumers.

Finally, universities such as São Paulo and UNAM have their own support apart from the QS ranking since they are at the top in the region in other rankings. They are still very far from the top-fifty in the world, but are putting distance between themselves and other HEIs in Latin America.

The public expressions regarding the position of the University of São Paulo are very optimistic: 'Our university is a major international expression since it generates quality education in all the knowledge areas. Graduates from our university are considered highly valued in the labor [sic] world filling public and private sectors' leadership positions (in the political and academic spheres) (Zago 2015). Nowadays, the University of São Paulo uses the *THE* and QS logos on its main website. They insist on being the best positioned university not only in Latin America but also among Ibero-American universities. They consider that 'despite some small variations, one thing these rankings reflect is a competitive university in terms of its knowledge production and research and that it is also doing a good job educating people'. They also suggest that this achievement is even more important if we consider its size in comparison with other HEIs internationally (Universidade de São Paulo 2014). In 2014, the USP reported 87,751 students enrolled, but only UBA reported in 2011 (with 308,748). UNAM had 342,542 in 2014 (including high-school students). In order to have some perspective among the top Latin American HEIs, the smallest ones had 16,575 in the case of Universidad de los Andes in 2013, and Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile reported having 26,694 in 2014.

In Mexico, people also notice that UNAM is the top Spanish-speaking university in the *THE* ranking. UNAM appears to have taken a more cautious approach to rankings and this may have had something to do with a conference on worldwide rankings they hosted in 2012 (León 2015).

### National rankings: Raising some questions

Some Latin American countries have developed national rankings. In the search conducted, we encountered two in Chile. The first was developed by the magazine *Qué pasa. Ranking de universidades*. The second is *Revista América Economía*, which is produced in Chile but it considers three Latin American countries: Peru, Chile and Mexico. These rankings reinforce the tendencies shown by other rankings where USP, UNAM and the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile are first in their countries. There is another local ranking in Brazil, elaborated by the newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo*. This ranking formulates different classifications according to the following issues: universities, research, teaching, innovation, internationalisation, and market (Folha de S. Paulo 2015). In Colombia, the government developed a ranking based on official information without giving notice to the institutions regarding this purpose. The result was the Educational Performance Indicators Model (*MIDE* in its Spanish acronym). Four of these rankings have been developed by private entities, mostly sponsored by Mexican newspapers. These rankings are: *Reforma*, *El Universal*, *Guía Universitaria. Las mejores cien universidades de México* (by the Digest Reader) and *El Economista*, which works together with the *Revista América Economía* (from Chile). According to Hazelkorn,

around the world, media organizations including the following have prevailed in the publication of such lists: The *Times Higher Education Supplement* (first published in the Times, October, 1992), the *Financial Times* and *The Sunday Times* (United Kingdom/Ireland), *Der Spiegel* (Germany) *Maclean's* (Canada), *Reforma* (Mexico).

(Hazelkorn 2007, 3)

But the author also mentions that in recent years, 'government and accreditation agencies and higher education organizations have developed their own systems for evaluating and ranking institutional performance' (ibid.). This has happened in Latin America, although the best example of a ranking similar to the international rankings is the Colombian case.

One question arises regarding the main reasons to develop national rankings: is this a reproduction of the global phenomenon where there is a need to differentiate the prestige of universities? Who are actually the main users of national rankings in developing countries? Are local rankings required to provide some visibility for HEIs that otherwise would never have a chance to appear in international rankings? Is defining who are the likely users dependent solely on whoever creates or develops the ranking? If not, what else is involved?

Contrasting the Colombian and Mexican situations may provide some elements to answer these questions. Most universities in Colombia seem very unhappy with the *MIDE* ranking for several reasons: apparently the government did not previously notify them about the development of the ranking but instead took the information these universities provided for other purposes.



Also, the government did not include all HEIs because they only considered those who were classified as 'universities' within the Colombian law and, lastly, the approach taken on by the government in presenting the results was quite deficient. The rankings' results were presented stating 'these are the best and the worst universities in Colombia'. As an example, a Colombian newspaper used the following as a header to talk about the *MIDE*: 'Top 10. These are the worst universities in Colombia' (Publimetro 2015).

Some university presidents consider the results were not fair for several reasons:

Before the ranking was published I spoke to the president of the University of the Andes. I told him I was very sure the University 'Minuto de Dios' was going to be in a really bad position in the ranking and indeed it was, it was located in the 130th position. In my opinion, this is the institution which is doing the best job, it has an amazing social impact, I wish we could be doing something similar. This is a great example why I consider this classification (the *MIDE*) does not have a clear vision of the real situation of the universities in Colombia (Jaime Bernal Villegas, president of the Technological University of Bolívar).

(El Observatorio de la Universidad Colombiana 2015)

In defence of the *MIDE*, the Colombian Vice-Minister for Higher Education, Natalia Ariza, indicates that this ranking is not a tool that will be used to distribute public funds to HEIs (since even the current law would not allow this), instead she says that its results would help make decisions on public policy. Initiatives such as the *MIDE* will be useful in making decisions 'to help Colombia become more educated' (Correa and Silva 2015). Contrasting with the latter, there are other opinions that consider *MIDE* only adopts a definition of educational quality based on a model of competence defined by the international markets and not by equity necessities (El Observatorio de la Universidad Colombiana 2015). If the government is using this ranking to shape policies, it is worth asking how convincing is the way in which the *MIDE* was presented? If they only wanted to provide information to the users (families and students) perhaps it was the most assertive strategy.

In the meantime, there are three significant lessons from the *MIDE*, which apparently is in the process of improving. First, sometimes the participation of public entities does not guarantee fewer controversies than when the entities are private. Second, the way the information is handled may cause a more negative (than positive) impact in the educational system. If the information is not presented carefully, the harm can outweigh the positive inputs a ranking is looking to generate. Last but not least, transparency is a key aspect as well; if the government was going to elaborate a classification based on official information, it would have been necessary to give notice before developing a ranking like this.

In the Mexican case, the media's rankings, particularly *Reforma* and *El Universal*, two major newspapers in the country, have developed rankings based on the employees, professors and students' opinions, also including some other

indicators such as the number of professors with a PhD and the size of the libraries (books, documents and general access). In 2013, one of the private institutions which was recognised in these rankings (in which the ranking is done by area of study) publicly said: 'ITAM is very pleased to be first in four programmes (out of 17 programmes ranked in total)' (ITAM 2013). The Institute came out number two in another programme. This is a way to take advantage of the promotion and visibility rankings offer to HEIs. A result from the surveys conducted among professors which are part of the rankings (2,098 surveyed by *Reforma* and 100 per programme by *El Universal*) is that the public HEIs were better positioned than the private ones. In fact, the other ranking, the *América Economía Intelligencia* also shows the predominance of public institutions over the private ones. This is definitely an interesting input from these rankings in Mexico where there are constant disputes between public and private HEIs. It has been an interesting support to the public sector. In this case, the main audiences of these rankings are the families and the students in Mexico, but it has been less transparent what other impacts these classifications might have besides informing users.

Part of the problem here is that there is an open market for rankings, but this open market also includes some room for more loose rankings that would be able to include institutions that would otherwise never fit into such classifications. The best example of this is the case of the ranking developed by the *Reader's Digest*, which has been mostly defined as a 'commercial classification'; the ranking includes many questionable institutions and it locates them in unusually high positions (La Jornada de Oriente 2015).

The situation in Mexico shows a country which is dealing with private actors developing rankings and reproducing the worldwide scenario in many ways. There is an inevitable gap between the top universities and the rest but there is space for the weakest universities in the most dubious rankings. It is very questionable whether this is useful for the users (families and students) or not. It also leads to other questions, such as if the rankings may be too important to let the market regulate itself or if perhaps the participation of the State is needed (with some additional actors functioning as coordination bodies or decentralised governmental offices). These are some of the questions that both cases lead to. Another broadly discussed part of the rankings topic is the phenomenon of isomorphism in which there is 'a model' of university and most institutions are trying to recreate this 'single successful model' when we know the diversity of HEIs is a main characteristic of this educational level. The last issue has to do with the effects in terms of inequity that have been produced by these comparisons. This will be discussed in the last section.

### Final remarks

Most of the top universities in the worldwide rankings are located in the United States and in the United Kingdom. They are very rich, they offer a large number of programmes in a considerable variety of disciplines, they produce a lot

of research, they attract many international students and faculty, they have the best infrastructure and so on. Nevertheless, these institutions represent a very small percentage even in their own countries. So, what happens with the rest of the HEIs in the world which happen to be the largest majority?

The level of anxiety that some of these rankings generate in the universities is sometimes directly related to how bad their position is in such rankings or their simple absence from it. We have discussed that there is a market of rankings with public and mostly private actors worldwide and particularly in Latin America. We have shown evidence on how the rankings are impacting some decisions made by governments (in scholarship allocation, etc.) or in terms of disseminating and organizing their information in order to improve their positions in the rankings or regarding building prestige. Yet, the rankings also impact in another way, one that can be quite harsh, actually. We are referring to how, instead of reducing the gap between the top universities and the rest, the rankings sometimes end up making it bigger.

Hazelkorn (2007, 91) asks: 'because new universities consistently rank lower than "older" more well-established universities, could the "Matthew Effect" be in operation? Are "elite" institutions caught in a virtuous cycle of cumulative advantage while "poorer" institutions get relatively poorer?' According to Van Vught and Westerheijden (2012), university rankings have increased the inequity gap among HEIs, benefiting the richer and more developed universities and leaving in a difficult situation those institutions with less capacity and fewer resources. If a race would work as a metaphor of what university rankings are, poorer universities are starting this race several feet behind the fastest runners.

The 'Matthew Effect' has been present in Latin American higher education in several aspects that range from students' access and participation to financing; nonetheless, the worldwide rankings accentuate some of these situations. It seems the main actors in the region have few options. One is to follow the current situation and continue reproducing the same game in the region; to keep playing with the rankings when they have a good position, ignoring them when they are not part of the rankings, using the volatile rankings more and more when it is necessary and even ignoring the methodological weaknesses with which the rankings are elaborated. Another option is to exercise the agency of each actor and start developing strategies where the government, the users and the stakeholders can have more information about what the HEIs are doing. Consequently, they could keep asking for accountability but at the same time trying to develop ways in which to analyse the social impact of HEIs from a broader approach. Latin American universities have an important tradition in terms of promoting cultural dissemination and social service. Such aspects do not exist in current ranking's measurements; perhaps it is a good time to be innovative. Worldwide university rankings may be here forever, like the conquistador's heritage in most developing countries. The question is what else can be done beyond that heritage? More than ever, Latin America needs to drastically improve the socio-economic conditions of most of its inhabitants;

enlightening its higher education systems is only a small part of it. The rankings can be an excellent excuse to start a serious debate on what is important for our higher education systems. Hopefully this opportunity will not be missed.

## Notes

- 1 The authors wish to thank Andrea Euan who assisted in the English proof-reading of this manuscript.
- 2 The international rankings examined for the purposes of this chapter are: *Times Higher Education (THE) 2015–2016 General, BRICS and Emerging Economies, Subject, and Reputation Rankings*; *Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) 2015 General, and Subject/Field Rankings*; *QS World University Rankings 2015 General, Latin America, Faculty, and Subject Rankings*; *Center for World University Ranking (CWUR) 2015*; *Webometrics*; *US News Best Global Universities 2015–2016*.

The national rankings examined for the purposes of this chapter are: *Qué pasa. Ranking de universidades 2014* (Chile); *Ranking de la calidad universitaria 2015: Revista América Economía* (Chile); *Ranking de la calidad universitaria 2015: Revista América Economía* (Peru); *Modelo de Indicadores del Desempeño de la Educación 2015 (MIDE)* (Colombia); *Ranking Universitario Phola 2015* (Brazil); *Ranking el Economista 2015* (Mexico); *Ranking el Reforma 2015* (Mexico); *Ranking el Universal 2015* (Mexico); *Guía Universitaria. Las mejores cien universidades de México 2014* (Mexico).

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