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Can One Size Fit All: Analysing the Impact of Regionalised Global Rankings on Latin American Higher Education

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Abstract: This paper reports on research on the contemporary effect of global university rankings on Latin American higher education. Over the last decade, several major international ranking models have moved to apply rankings metrics at a regional level to address the marginalising of universities from the global south in their lead offerings. Using a critical meta-synthesis method, the research analysed the application and impact of these rankings across Latin American higher education models. The analysis identified escalating anxiety that regionalised rankings have the potential to undermine institutional and academic diversity, imposing measures that discount the unique sociocultural histories of systems and undermining the differing social missions entrusted to Latin American higher education. The implications are that the imposition of the assumptions of global rankings are disrupting frameworks of meaning about the purpose of higher education, suggesting that alternative metrics that better reflect local system and institutional imperatives and trajectories are necessary.

Paper: At a global level, over recent decades university rankings have become a pervasive and influential social barometer, increasingly shaping public, policy and institutional perceptions of university performance (Pusser & Marginson, 2013; Tight, 2019), becoming broadly accepted as the most effective means to measure the comparative quality of higher education (Hazelkorn, 2015). This elevating significance of university rankings reflects a complex range of factors, including heightening demands for accountability and improved quality in higher education provision, accelerating globalisation and the increasing commodification of learning (Altbach, 2016; Hazelkorn, 2019). As the stakes involved in higher education choices have escalated—both in terms of costs and outcomes—university rankings have offered an increasingly powerful quality proxy to fill an information deficit as to the performance and status of higher education institutions (Hazelkorn, 2016). Yet the primary international rankings remain contentious in their design and subject of continuing debate and criticism given the inherent fragility of research and reputation centred criteria. Significantly, anxiety about the validity and reliability of rating criteria has encouraged the major international rankings to adopt a more homogeneous form over time, though with a continuing weight on research performance and reputation (Marope, Wells, & Hazelkorn, 2013).

Consequently, an inherent reality of global university rankings is that the 'top' 100 institutions have remained relatively stable over time, and changes in the following 400 universities were from reshuffling, rather than from the arrival of new entrants (Hazelkorn, 2015).

In Latin America, only a handful of universities feature in any of the global rankings. It has been suggested that this marginalisation reflects both the legacy of high investment in higher education in the Anglosphere, as well as the socio-cultural origins of the ranking designs themselves (Guaglianone, 2018). Over the last decade—primarily in response to the relative anonymity of Latin American universities in the leading international rankings and rising social demands for the benchmarking of the comparative quality of regional institutions—major international rankings organisations have increasingly moved to produce Latin American rankings as a sub-dimension of international scales, thereby making visible local differentiation that may be more abstract in global form (Maldonado-Malonando & Cortes, 2017). These regionalised rankings have gained heightened significance, leading to increasing ambiguity around the mission of universities without the investment or reputational advantage to achieve high ranking scores (Bernasconi, 2015).

This paper reports the first stage of research that is designed to understand the contemporary effect of university rankings on higher education systems in Latin America. This stage involved a systematic qualitative meta-analysis of Latin American research related to rankings, which was used as an explanatory means to understand the phenomenon (Walsh & Downe, 2005). Specifically, a critical meta-synthesis method was used to analyse literature that investigated the application and impact of global university rankings across Latin American higher education models. This form of critical meta-synthesis is well established in qualitative research as a means of investigating the conceptual foundations of a phenomenon, particularly in its ability to provide a critical interpretation and systematic analysis toward new understandings of the focus of investigated practices (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, & Suri, 2018).

The outcomes of this investigation cast serious doubt on the relevance of global university rankings to the heterogeneous contexts of Latin American higher education. It is apparent that despite quickly becoming assimilated as an accepted measure of comparative quality in Latin American higher education, these regionally adapted international rankings outcomes are rapidly distorting social perceptions of the value of academic work and institutional constructions of quality across the region. Moreover, evidence supported the claims of the increasingly pervasive effect of rankings in shaping institutional responses in Latin American contexts (Guzmán-Valenzuela & Gómez, 2019) and in encouraging local researchers to embrace dominant global epistemologies (Guzmán-Valenzuela & Bernasconi, 2018). It was identified that there is escalating anxiety that regionalised rankings have the potential to undermine academic, institutional, and cultural diversity, by imposing measures of the global north that discount the unique sociocultural histories of systems and undermine the differing social missions entrusted to Latin American higher education. This research suggests that the seductive metrics of rankings is disrupting established frameworks of meaning about the value and purpose of higher education, subordinating its sociocultural trajectory to a range of imposed measures of quality endemic to the Anglosphere that both lack relevance and potentially undermine the complex and multifaceted developmental missions of regional higher education models. This suggests that alternative metrics that better reflect local system and institutional imperatives and

trajectories are necessary.

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