

179 Between a rock and a hard place: the effect of regionalised global university rankings in Chile

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This paper reports on an investigation of the responses of Chilean higher education to the emergence of regionalised global university rankings in Latin America. Using interviews with educational leaders across 18 institutions, the research sought to understand the effect of these global rankings on conceptions of quality, local academic work, and social perceptions of institutional value. Using the conceptual framing of a glonacal heuristic (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002), a series of tensions generated by the escalating social significance of regionalised forms of global rankings were identified. These tensions included the value of global comparison versus sustaining a local mission, institutional recognition versus structural inequality in Chilean higher education and the potential and danger of the influence of global North epistemologies and language in shaping future local higher education. The implications are considered through the lenses of how quality is defined, and institutional value understood, in the global South.

Full paper

Introduction

Over the last decade, two leading university rankings organisations (Times Higher Education and Quacquarelli Symonds) have designed regionalised forms of global rankings for Latin America. The emergence of these new rankings has acted to simultaneously reinforce and disrupt social assumptions of university quality that have been historically formed through national accreditation systems and localised rankings models (Hazelkorn, 2019; Author, 2023). These regionalised global rankings—calculated using slightly modified criteria to that used in their international iterations—have become increasingly influential as the call for institutions in the region to address the demands of being a legitimate ‘global’ university has become more prominent (Bernasconi & Knobel, 2021; Véliz & Marshall, 2021).

However, there has been limited research undertaken across the region on the practical impact of these new and potentially powerful global rankings on local institutional practices (Guaglianone, 2018). Although research has examined the specific impact of localised rankings or national accreditation models, less attention has been given to what impact global rankings have on the nature of conceptions of high education quality and mission, on the nature and form of local academic work, and on changing social perceptions of institutional value borne of a global perspective. Given this gap, the objective of the study reported here was to understand what were the mediating effects that regionalised global rankings had on the strategic orientation and everyday research and teaching practices in Chilean higher education.

Research Methodology

Using a qualitative, case study-based methodology (Stake, 1995), the data for this study was generated using a series of semi-structured interviews with university leaders across a range of Chilean universities (n=18). In addition, key institutional characteristics (i.e., current accreditation level, local ranking, research performance), as well as materials related to global rankings issued by these institutions were subject to artefact analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The universities included were selected through a purposive sample based on a typology that ensured a range of institutions of differing focus, size and location were included. Data were thematically coded using a concept-driven approach based on the glonacal heuristic developed by Marginson & Rhoades (2002).

Findings

The outcomes of the research identified a series of tensions that were generated between the often-conflicting demands of global, national, and local imperatives. Although the extent of these tensions varied considerably across different institutional types, they remained apparent in differing forms.

The most fundamental tension identified was between the drive to be recognised as a globally legitimate institution, whilst at the same time responding to the powerful local demands for social development within the country. Institutions that had been ranked at the highest level of rankings expressed this in terms of looking globally for quality assurance and locally for social recognition of purpose, while those more lowly ranked rejected the relative importance of rankings against the local drives of their institutions (whilst also featuring ranking fragments positive to the institution).

Secondly, another identified tension existed between the exposure of regionalised global rankings provided to the apparent disparities in quality and resources between global and local institutions, and between institutions in the highly fragmented Chilean higher education model. This global and local stratification was a source of dual tensions for higher-ranked local institutions as it highlighted the ascribed distance from the Anglosphere, while also revealing an uncomfortable socio-economic advantage that benefits the institution in the local system. Conversely, lower-ranked institutions tended to stress the irrelevance of global comparisons and foreground the primacy of the local in assessments of quality.

Thirdly, the rising social hegemony of global rankings was broadly identified as having the potential of privileging global North epistemologies and the English language in shaping future local higher education. For higher-ranked institutions, this meant adaptation to have more capacity to publish internationally, whilst attempting to maintain a legitimate local focus. For the lower ranked, it was identified as a 'necessary evil' that was potentially undermining the local social and educational mission of the institution.

Implications

The findings suggest that the mediating effect of regionalised global rankings is both disruptive and stratifying in its effect. By undermining traditional conceptions of the various social missions of Chilean universities, institutions are being forced increasingly to remediate conventional assumptions about what represents quality as global rankings increasingly shape social and policy assumptions in nation-states about what university quality looks like. Such remediation demonstrates the strong gravitational pull of global rankings and their broader homogenising impact. This effect has the potential to displace the socio-historical foundations of Chilean universities that are grounded in imperatives of socio-economic development.

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