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The Position of Latin America and the Caribbean on Rankings in Higher Education

Historical Background: Higher Education is a Public Good. The first World Conference on Higher Education (WCHE 1998) approved the World Declaration titled “Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century: Vision and Action” (UNESCO 1998). In it is emphasized that higher education should develop skills to foster change and progress in society. It is stated that beyond continuing to fulfill its core mission with quality and relevance in terms of teaching, research and cultural diffusion, higher education should assume the specific mission of promoting sustainable development and the enhancement of life in society: “...to educate for citizenship and for active participation in society, with a worldwide vision...” to “...help protect and enhance societal values by training young people in the values which form the basis of democratic citizenship and by providing critical and detached perspectives... and the reinforcement of humanistic perspectives...”. Along the same lines, the declaration underscores that higher education must strengthen its role of service to society, especially in those areas concerned with “...eliminating poverty, intolerance, violence, illiteracy, hunger, environmental degradation and disease...” Likewise, the declaration asserts the importance of reinforcing cooperation between institutions and the world of work, as well as of strengthening areas of research focused on analyzing and anticipating social needs.

The analysis of the WCHE 1998 ten years later at the second world conference, the WCHE 2009 (UNESCO, 2009), presented clashing viewpoints that were absolutely contrary to those forged both in the agreements of the WCHE 1998 and in the recent Declaration of the CRES 2008 (UNESCO-IESALC, 2008). Various sectors interested in imposing a different view attempted to prevent the establishment of the basic linking principle between higher education and society, as well as of the idea that the importance of quality and relevance be considered concepts that must be indivisibly united.

The Latin American delegation fortunately managed to endorse the idea that higher education is a **social public good** that allows for open access to everyone without any type of discrimination. That higher education is a social



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public good means that it must rest on three principles: equity of access, continuity of the services offered, and the ability to adapt to new situations in order to guarantee equity and continuity in any context.

For this reason, the CRES 2008 Declaration (UNESCO-IESALC, 2008) opens with the statement that “Higher education is a social public good, a universal human right, and a responsibility of States. This is the conviction and the basis for the strategic role that it should play in the processes of sustainable development of the countries of the region.” This conference brought together more than 3,500 participants from all of the countries in LAC, and it prepared and contributed a variety of materials that were utilized to formulate the Latin American and Caribbean position on higher education presented at the World Conference on Higher Education in Paris (WCHE 2009). At that conference, the country delegations from the six regions of the world (Africa, North America, Asia, Asia Pacific, Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean), were constituted by representatives of the respective governments (approximately 800 out of a total of 1,200 participants).

The final Communiqué (UNESCO, 2009) was the result of the discussion and analysis of the proposals of the six regional conferences held beforehand. Of the five general aspects addressed in it, the first one refers to higher education’s social Responsibility.

It was made clear that higher education is a public good and not a tradable commodity, that it is the responsibility of all social actors and especially the governments. The governments were urged to maintain or increase, but not decrease, financing to HEI. It was made clear that there must be a diversity of HEI and within them universities must have the three missions, which are teaching, research-innovation, and community service, all managed in a context of institutional autonomy, expanding the interdisciplinary and intercultural focus while fostering both critical thinking and active citizenship. Autonomy is a necessary requirement in order to fulfill the university missions through quality, relevance, efficiency, transparency, and social accountability. Higher education must not only develop skills for the present and future world, but also contribute to the education of ethical citizens committed to a culture of peace, the defense of human rights, and the values of democracy.



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Summing up, as can be observed, Higher Education has had two crucial and synergistic moments in the definition of its function and especially of its role as a public good, which are contained in the UNESCO declarations of 1998 and 2009 both of which acknowledge that the university needs to “educate highly qualified graduates and responsible citizens able to meet the needs of all sectors of human activity...” (UNESCO, 1998). Therefore, “[h]igher education must not only give solid skills for the present and future world but must also contribute to the education of ethical citizens committed to the construction of peace, the defense of human rights and the values of democracy.” (UNESCO, 2009).

Development of University Rankings. The development of Information Systems that contain data and indices that allow for the evaluation of diversely complex educational processes is necessary given the importance of making informed decisions based on a firm knowledge of educational systems and quantifiable results.

During the last few years, higher education systems and institutions have been subject to evaluation processes that serve different purposes. These include, among others, the accountability of financial resources received and utilized, the implementation of improvement and quality assurance formulas, public legitimation of function and goal fulfillment, and government control over the performance of the system as a whole and the institutions that it comprises (Palomba and Banta, 1997; Rowley et al., 1997; Ewell, 1999; Acosta, 2000; Mendoza, 2002; Borgue and Bingham, 2003; Villaseñor, 2003; Díaz Barriga et al., 2008). The so-called “evaluation culture” (Power, 1987; Elliot, 2002; Bolseguí and Fuguet, 2006) that is prevalent in the field of higher education has required and given place to the development of different methods and instruments to measure, rate and follow up the performance and results of the academic functions and management activities of the institutions.

Within the broad range of modalities, focuses and evaluation perspectives (Brooks 2005), rankings and league tables have achieved great visibility. The expansion of this methodology is fundamentally a response to a need, determined by a market logic, to classify, order and hierarchically rank



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the multiplicity of institutions that exist in a realm of increasingly diversified and stratified educational services (Cuening, 1987; Kogan, 1989; Puiggrós and Krottsch, 1994; Brennan, 2001; Elliot, 2002; Strathern, 2000; Marginson and Ordorika, 2010).

There is currently a wide variety of ranking-type of classifications on the international, regional and national levels. Among the most well-known of the international ones we find the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU),¹ Webometrics,² the Times Higher Education (THE),³ QS,⁴ and SCImago Institutions Rankings.⁵ Among the regional ones, those of the European Union and Leiden University⁶ stand out. There are also national classification systems in several countries. In the United States, the US New and World Report⁷ and The Top American Research Universities⁸ are the most widely recognized.

¹ Academic Rankings of World Universities, compiled by the Jiao Tong Shanghai University since 2003. This ranking of 500 universities from around the world is based on quantitative indicators of scientific production.

² The Webometrics Ranking of World Universities has been produced since 2004 by Cybermetrics Lab (CCHS), a research group that is part of the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (CSIC) in Spain. Webometrics hierarchically classifies more than 4,000 universities around the world based on their web pages.

³ The Times Higher Education (THE) ranking system was originally published by the higher education supplement of the London Times newspaper. Since 2005 it is part of the TSL Limited group. From 2007 until 2009 it was compiled by the Quacquarelli and Symonds (QS) company. Beginning in 2010, QS produced its own ranking; THE changed its methodology and is now generated by Thomson Reuters. THE performs a hierarchical classification of universities around the world based on a combination of scientific production indicators and peer opinions of academics/professors and employers.

⁴ The QS ranking has been produced since 2010 by Quacquarelli and Symonds. It utilizes the original methodology developed for THE, which also combines quantitative and reputational methods.

⁵ The SIR World Report 2010 of the SCImago Research Group claims to be the most comprehensive ranking system in existence. It includes 2,833 institutions that, according to the Scopus database, altogether generated 80.55% of the scientific production between 2004-2008. It encompasses universities and other organizations focused on research of various scopes and objectives that are located in countries in the five continents. The institutions are grouped into five different types of sectors: higher education, research hospitals, government agencies, companies, and others.

⁶ The Leiden Ranking, produced by Leiden University's Centre for Science and Technology Studies (CWTS), is solely based on bibliometric indicators. It offers results for the top 100 universities in Europe according to the number of scientific articles and other types of publications gathered in international bibliometric indices.

⁷ The U.S. News & World Report College and University Rankings is in the United States the most widely known classification of national colleges and universities. The ranking system is based on qualitative data and diverse opinions obtained through surveys conducted on educational institutions, as well as on professors and university administrators.



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It is important to bear in mind that, for the most part, these lists and classifications have been developed either by publishing companies (newspapers or journals) or by independent groups of consultants. At present, rankings that were originally produced by academic bodies, constituted by evaluation specialists (such as ARWU and SCImago), have also become involved in the production and commercialization of these instruments.

It can be said that rankings reflect the combined and changing effect of forces that are struggling to control the flow of knowledge in the new global arena: the system of knowledge prestige tends to reproduce a status quo in which universities that have traditionally dominated the field of international scientific production consolidate their position while a small number of emerging institutions seek, and sometimes achieve, a competitive presence. Revolving around research results and numbers of citations and publications, rankings have shaped a new prestige scale that is largely dominated by the leading Anglo-American universities. Furthermore, rankings have thereby become the means of assigning positions in the circuits of production of knowledge-based goods and of identifying their transmission flows. In this process, scientific production, recognized and codified, is privileged above other types of knowledge. A division is also established between universities that produce scientific knowledge, which are considered the legitimate players in the knowledge economy, and institutions that are primarily focused on professional training.

Limitations and Negative Effects of Rankings. The academic debate about rankings has highlighted limitations and negative effects such as the following:

- a. There is no clarity about the guiding criteria in the selection of evaluated institutions.
- b. Sorting is performed based on quality measurements without addressing the issue of what the distance between the different assigned placements means.
- c. As tools that seek to communicate the quality level that universities have attained, rankings have a limited number of indicators.



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- d. There are undesirable effects to the dissemination of rankings because decisions on university policy or institutional change are informed by the pressure generated through public opinion rather than by a clear institutional project.
- e. The quality of an institution is determined based on a small group of performance indicators.
- f. There is a real risk of undermining the autonomy of institutions since great pressure is exerted to focus institutional efforts only on those dimensions that increase prestige.
- g. They favor differential financing policies that force institutions to improve their response to the criteria that the process of ranking defines. The worst part is that in the vast majority of cases rankings are performed by agents outside the university communities (newspapers, professional organizations, businesses, etc.).
- h. They are based on a single and ideal model of the university and expect that all institutions to move in the same direction. As a result, they have no knowledge of the nature of academic traditions, infrastructure, objectives, and institutional context, among other aspects.

In this sense, perhaps the strongest criticism is that prestige based on rankings does not take into consideration the significant social value of the broader group of academic functions that universities perform, particularly those in Latin America and the Caribbean. In the end, the public policy imperative is lost in the belief that quantification equals quality (Hazelkorn, 2009).

Position of Latin America and the Caribbean. Within the framework of the discussion about the challenges of internationalization in the Latin American context, the Regional Conference on Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean, held in Cartagena de Indias in 2008 (CRES 2008), maintained that:

“The creation of a Latin American and Caribbean Research and higher education Area (ENLACES in Spanish) is essential, and must be part of the agenda of the region’s governments and multilateral agencies. This is key to reaching higher levels of regional integration in its fundamental



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aspects: greater depth in its cultural dimension; the development of academic strengths that will promote regional approaches to the world's most pressing problems; the use of human resources to create synergies on a regional scale; the bridging of gaps in the availability of professional and technical knowledge and capacities; the consideration of knowledge from the viewpoint of collective well-being; and the creation of competencies for the organic link between academic knowledge, production, employment, and social life, instilled with a humanistic attitude and intellectual responsibility.”

It was also agreed that one of the instruments to achieve the objectives of ENLACES would be:

“ [the] articulation of national information systems regarding Higher Education in the region in order to foster, through the Map of Higher Education in LAC (MESALC), mutual knowledge between systems as a basis for academic mobility and as an input for appropriate public and institutional policies.”

Based on this position, the Latin American representation at the WCHE 2009 questioned the pertinence of creating or using ranking systems as a means of performance evaluation of university systems, institutions and programs.

With this background, on the occasion of the IV Meeting of University Networks and Councils of Chancellors of Latin America and the Caribbean, sponsored by the IESALC in Buenos Aires, Argentina and held May 5th and 6th, 2011, the subject of rankings was discussed once more and an agreement was reached to:

- 1) Ratify the CRES 2008 agreements that stressed the nature of Higher Education as a social public good,
- 2) Recognize that there is a growing demand for knowledge about the conditions, characteristics, performance, and impacts of higher education institutions in each country and in the region as a whole,



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- 3) Manifest concern regarding the undesirable effects of rankings, such as:
- a. The homogenization of the diversity of institutions relative to the dominant model of the elitist research university in the United States and the resulting loss of identity of the Latin American university,
 - b. The biased perception of the operation, quality, and results of the region's HEI, which is shaped by partial measurements that focus primarily on the international circulation of scientific production,
 - c. The influence these views have on decision makers on a national level and in the institutions themselves,
 - d. The delegitimation of national HEI, especially those that promote alternative models to the research-based university, and
 - e. The confusion of rankings with systems of information and of the ranks themselves as objective data of measurements in different areas.
- 4) Propose to government authorities in charge of the coordination of university systems, to the university associations and networks, to university rectors and institution directors, as well as to UNESCO as a whole the idea of promoting alternatives to rankings in order to achieve a better understanding and evaluation of the reality of higher education. This proposal includes such highlights as:
- a. The generation of systems of information about the HEI in the totality of their functions and responsibilities, their characteristics, processes, resources, and results,
 - b. The formulation of rigorous, objective and reliable comparative studies so that there are referents that allow for better decision making,
 - c. The coordination of common actions and measures to promote the international circulation and recognition of academic publications and scientific knowledge produced in the region's HEI, and



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- d. Strengthen the actions the IESALC is currently undertaking in this regard, particularly the Map of Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Map of Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (MESALC).

Fulfilling its fundamental mission to further the development and transformation of tertiary education as an active participant in the conceptualization, design, and formulation of UNESCO programs, objectives, and strategies on Higher Education (HE), UNESCO-IESALC proposed at CRES 2008 the creation of a Map of Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (MESALC). MESALC has been devised as a tool that will help meet the region's need to build academic networks of an institutional, national, and regional scope with the objective of analyzing strategic problems facing HE and devising appropriate measures to overcome strong asymmetries.

At CRES 2008, LAC countries ratified their commitment to HE. A final declaration was adopted during that meeting through the consensus of the Latin American and Caribbean States, represented in their entirety by more than 3,500 members of the regional academic community; among those present were directors, professors, university rectors, students, government representatives, and national, regional and international organizations. This conference provided for the creation of a generalized diagnosis of the situation of tertiary education in the region and the proposal of possible means to foster its growth. Thus, within the framework of the consolidation of ENLACES (CRES 2008) it was determined that among other actions:

“... it is necessary to undertake: ... the articulation of national information systems regarding Higher Education in the region in order to foster, through the Map of Higher Education in LAC (MESALC), mutual knowledge between systems as a basis for academic mobility and as an input for appropriate public and institutional policies.” (Declaration CRES 2008)

This is in addition to establishing a strategy that enables the development of a genuine culture of information management in which the information is accurate, transparent, and relevant, and can be shared within the



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processes of cooperation and exchange of good practices that must become a permanent quality improvement process of higher education in Latin America and the Caribbean.

MESALC is an online information system, created by UNESCO-IESALC; its purpose is to promote the articulation of national information systems on HE in the region while also contemplating the creation of such spaces in countries that lack the necessary infrastructure.

MESALC seeks to strengthen knowledge about HE and foster a culture of information. To that end, it has a set of descriptors, variables, and indicators aimed at evaluating the academic situation of each country. In addition, it includes a Glossary of Higher Education that aids in identifying and defining the basic concepts used in the project's implementation.

The categories and statistical data constitute a scale information base that allows the user to be situated in three perspectives: regional, national, and institutional. The creation and development of the project depends on each country and higher education institution (HEI) involved. In turn, the countries will reap national benefits from the project as it adapts to the public policies that promote the development of HE.

It is important to reiterate that the MESALC Online Information System (SI) includes basic functions that allow for intra and inter institutional, national, and regional academic interaction. These may be found at three points: the collection of statistical data through online forms and the mass import and export of data, the management of general content and information related to HE in LAC, and the creation of a group of benchmarks about HE.

The purposes of MESALC are:

- To contribute to a thorough understanding of Higher Education in the region, setting out from national particularities that are articulated in regional standards.
- To serve as an instrument for the formulation and follow-up of policies related to tertiary education and to build national, subregional and regional referents for the improvement and transformation of the national institutions and systems of Higher Education.



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- To identify and share successful institutional and national experiences, as well as to foster and facilitate solidary cooperation among the systems of Higher Education and the institutions in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC).

This tool was presented at the CRES 2008 as a regional alternative to University Rankings, which are an inevitable manifestation of the globalization and commercialization of higher education. Rankings do not fit the characteristics and needs of LAC as one of the main shortfalls in HE within the region is the lack of information and the absence of data and statistical systems that allow for sufficient and relevant knowledge to establish standardized interinstitutional comparisons, thereby hindering a relevant and competent evaluation relative to other regions.

The creation of these spaces that allow for mutual and proper knowledge of the reality of higher education is a vital and prime concern for the countries (governments) and HEI of LAC. These spaces facilitate the evaluation and understanding of our particularities, characteristics, and values, both positive and negative, before being compared according to standards established for realities that are not ours, and which categorize us and place us at a clear disadvantage, overshadowing our merits and accomplishments in the fields of higher education, science, and technology since the latter tend to take place in the public HEI in LAC.

Unlike rankings, the Map allows the end user to become informed, in a georeferenced manner, about the HE features in the different HEI of LAC as well as to conduct a free comparison of variables and indicators of his/her own choice, thereby making the selection process a transparent space that enables the user to formulate search criteria in areas and aspects that are of his/her particular interest.

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