

# GLOBAL UNIVERSITY RANKINGS AND THE POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE

Edited by  
**Michelle Stack**



# GLOBAL UNIVERSITY RANKINGS AND THE POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE

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For many institutions, to ignore your university's ranking is to become invisible, a risky proposition in a competitive search for funding. But rankings tell us little if anything about the education, scholarship, or engagement with communities offered by a university. Drawing on a range of research and inquiry-based methods, *Global University Rankings and the Politics of Knowledge* exposes how universities became servants to the rankings industry and its impact.

Conceptually unique in its scope, *Global University Rankings and the Politics of Knowledge* addresses the lack of empirical research behind university and journal ranking systems. Chapters from internationally recognized scholars in decolonial studies provide readers with robust frameworks to understand the intersections of coloniality and Indigeneity and how they play out in higher education. Contributions from diverse geographical and disciplinary contexts explore the political economy of rankings within the contexts of the Global North and South, and examine alternatives to media-driven rankings. This book allows readers to consider the intersections of power and knowledge within the wider contexts of politics, culture, and the economy, to explore how assumptions about gender, social class, sexuality, and race underpin the meanings attached to rankings, and to imagine a future that confronts and challenges cognitive, environmental, and social injustice.

MICHELLE STACK is an associate professor in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia.

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# Global University Rankings and the Politics of Knowledge

EDITED BY MICHELLE STACK

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# Abbreviations

HEI	higher education institutions
ARWU	Academic Ranking of World Universities (sometimes referred to as the Shanghai Ranking)
THE	<i>Times Higher Education</i>
THEWUR	Times Higher Education World University Rankings
QS	Quacquarelli Symonds
“Big Three”	THEWUR, QS, and ARWU
IF	Impact Factor

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GLOBAL UNIVERSITY RANKINGS AND  
THE POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE

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# THEME 1

## Geopolitics, Rankings, and Journal Impact Factors

The chapters in this section point to the ways in which global university rankings interact with media, government rankings, and regional geopolitics. The authors demonstrate the need to understand rankings as a global phenomenon that requires a nuanced analysis regarding how rankings operate in different locations. Marion Lloyd and Imanol Ordorika, for example, point to differences within Latin America. The former president of Chile focused plans on providing free education at the higher education level and a more equitable system. Conversely, the Ecuadoran government focused on funding a relatively small number of students to attend top-fifty globally ranked universities. Creso M. Sá, Nadiia Kachynska, Emma Sabzalieva, and Magdalena Martinez show how the accepted symbol of rankings was used to implement an anti-corruption index of higher education institutions in Kazakhstan with the intention of being seen as a “world education space.” Riyad A. Shahjahan, Annabelle Estera, and Vivek Vellanki argue that rankings come to be normalized in different contexts not merely through printed text but also through visuals that reinforce a colonial geopolitics of knowledge. All three chapters address regions that are under-represented in critical literature on rankings. Studies therefore show that rankings do not stand on their own but are part of wider policy and politics agendas, and as such, they seek to shape higher education in different directions.

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# 1 International University Rankings as Cultural Imperialism: Implications for the Global South

MARION LLOYD AND IMANOL ORDORIKA

## Introduction

When researchers in Shanghai unveiled the first international university ranking in 2003, the news was met with little fanfare. Few could have foreseen that, virtually overnight, the model would become a global phenomenon, shaping higher education policy everywhere from Beijing to Budapest to Brasilia (Marginson, 2007; Ordorika & Lloyd, 2013). Fifteen years later, however, the rankings are as influential as they are ubiquitous. At once mirroring and propagating broader hegemonic trends, they have generated an enormous – and, we argue in this chapter, highly problematic – impact on individual institutions and on national higher education systems as a whole.

In developing the pioneering Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), researchers at Shanghai Jiao Tong University pursued primarily domestic goals (Liu & Cheng, 2005). In 1998, then president Jiang Zemin announced Project 985, which sought to create a system of “world-class” universities in China. As part of those efforts, the government set out to determine how Chinese universities stacked up against the global standard-bearers, particularly those in the United States and Europe. The resulting ranking formed part of a broader strategy to bolster scientific research and fuel economic growth in the country. However, the model would soon be replicated far beyond national borders, with major implications for institutions throughout the world.

In 2004, the *Times Higher Education* magazine supplement (THE) created its own international ranking in conjunction with the British firm Quacquarelli Symonds (QS). Then, in 2009, the two companies parted ways and began producing rival rankings. Today, there are some twenty international league tables – evidence of the growing demand for the systems in an increasingly globalized and competitive higher education market (*The Economist*, 2018).

While national or regional tables have existed for several decades in the English-speaking world (Turner, 2005; Webster, 1986), the impact of the



international rankings – and ARWU, THE, and QS, in particular – has become particularly significant in influencing policymakers in many countries. Despite the considerable variations in their methodologies and results (both among rankings and from year to year), the systems are portrayed as objective measures of the overall quality of universities (Lloyd et al., 2011; Marginson, 2012; Ordorika & Lloyd, 2013). In practice, however, the rankings serve as *Harvardometers*, measuring how closely institutions adhere to a sole model of higher education – that of the elite, Anglo-Saxon research university, of which Harvard is the premier example (Ordorika, 2011).

The rankings phenomenon has prompted a large body of research, a majority of which focuses on the systems' impact on policy (Ehrenberg, 2004; Dill, 2006; Ordorika & Lloyd, 2013, 2015) and their methodological limitations and shortcomings (Florian, 2007; Ishikawa, 2009; Jaienski, 2009; Ordorika & Rodríguez, 2010; Van Raan, 2005; Ying & Jingao, 2009). There is also a growing literature that analyses the rankings from a critical theoretical perspective; such studies tend to focus on the role of the classification systems in replicating and furthering neo-liberal policy agendas within higher education (Hazelkorn, 2007, 2008; Marginson 2012; Marginson & Ordorika, 2011; Pusser & Marginson, 2012).

In this chapter, we contribute to the theoretical debate over the international university rankings by employing critical perspectives that view higher education as a *field of power* (Bourdieu, 2008) and *conflict* (Ordorika, 2003). We demonstrate how the hierarchical systems play a role in assigning value, in effect endorsing certain aspects of universities (scientific production and prestige) over others (their role in promoting more equitable and democratic societies). The process, we argue, is a form of what Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999) have termed “cultural imperialism,” in which particularisms resulting from a specific national context are presented and imposed as universal standards.

Secondly, by providing examples from regions as disparate as Europe, Asia, and Latin America, we show how the classification systems' influence extends far beyond educational policy arenas and across a wide range of cultural and political contexts. Instead, we view the rankings as fundamental agents in the broader contest for cultural hegemony on a global scale. The implications of that struggle for hegemony are particularly significant for Latin America and other parts of the so-called Global South, where institutions are forced to compete on an uneven playing field while adhering to rules determined in the Global North.

We begin by outlining our theoretical frame, which posits the rankings as key tools in furthering the hegemony of the US-based model of higher education. We then discuss the logic of the rankings, as both products of the new market-driven, managerial culture in higher education and actors in its propagation throughout the world. Next, we analyse the ways in which the systems foment social exclusion and inequality and exacerbate North-South dichotomies

through the imposition of an arbitrary set of norms (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1981), to the detriment of local and national priorities. Finally, we review the impact of the rankings paradigm on government and institutional policies in Europe, Asia, and Latin America.

By encouraging countries to emulate a sole, hegemonic model of institution, the rankings ignore national and regional traditions in higher education while undercutting local development priorities. In Latin America, for instance, the systems do not account for institutions' broader contributions to society as "state-building universities," a regional tradition that has no equivalent in the English-speaking world (Ordorika & Pusser, 2007). Institutions that adhere to this model are characterized by "autonomy, democracy and co-government, the development of science and knowledge, academic freedom, and, above all, the assumption on the part of the university of political responsibility for nation-building and the defense of democracy" (Ordorika, 2018). With the exception of research production, none of those attributes are measured by the rankings.

Nor is the process value-neutral. The rankings promote a neo-liberal, market-oriented logic, which views higher education as a competitive sphere (Marginson & Ordorika, 2011). Institutions must vie for access to funding (both public and private) and students (who are increasingly seen as customers) in order to survive in an increasingly fierce global market. Furthermore, in relying almost exclusively on easily quantifiable data, the rankings assign greater value to certain areas of university activities; for instance, they prioritize research over teaching and the hard sciences over the humanities – hierarchies which are largely arbitrary in nature.

Much more is at stake than national or institutional pride. In establishing a single, hegemonic gold standard for higher education, the rankings have fuelled a global "academic arms race" (Ehrenberg, 2004; Dill, 2006) among institutions and nations. Countries as diverse as China, France, and Brazil (Huang, 2017; Lloyd, 2017; Ordorika & Lloyd, 2013) have invested billions of dollars in remaking their higher education systems, in a largely fruitless bid to catch up to the global standard-bearers. In doing so, they have adopted, often uncritically, a single notion of "excellence" (Readings, 1996); this concept, in turn, is deeply infused with a specific set of cultural norms and priorities.

The process is a manifestation of what Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999) have termed US-based "cultural imperialism," which "rests on the power to universalize particularisms linked to a singular historical tradition by causing them to be misrecognized as such" (1999, p. 41). In this way, "numerous topics directly issuing from the intellectual confrontations relating to the social particularity of American society and of its universities have been imposed, in apparently de-historicized form, upon the whole planet" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1999, p. 41). Examples range from the now-ubiquitous merit-pay systems for university

professors and researchers to the push to create “world-class universities” in some of the world’s poorest regions.

An apparent irony of this process is the fact that the most influential international rankings are produced outside the United States, in effect inadvertently propagating US cultural hegemony throughout the world. Meanwhile, in the US context, domestic rankings carry far more sway; in recent years, more than a dozen universities have acknowledged inflating the data they provide to the highly influential *U.S. News & World Report* ranking to improve their standing in the competitive US market (Jaschek, 2018). Nonetheless, the influence of the American model on the methodologies of the international rankings is undeniable. The systems privilege indicators that are characteristic of or even unique to the US context – for example, the number of publications in English-language journals or the level of patent production by universities.

Still, the rankings paradigm is facing significant resistance in many parts of the world. Critics from Johannesburg to Mexico City are questioning the neutrality of the systems and their outsized role in dictating policy in areas ranging from higher education to immigration (Ambrus, 2012). In the process, they are challenging dominant cultural dogma, defined by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999) as “these commonplaces, in the Aristotelian sense of notions or theses with which one argues, but about which one does not argue” (p. 42).

The debate reflects dual and often conflicting goals for tertiary education: on the part of the government and industry, of creating a globalized workforce that can compete in the knowledge economy, and social demands for more equitable and mass access to higher education as a mechanism for upward mobility (Labaree, 1997). The outcome of that contest is likely to have far-reaching consequences in shaping the dominant cultural and economic paradigms of the twenty-first century.

## The Ideological Debate

More than three decades ago, Altbach (1987) identified five elements that contribute to the competitive advantages of universities in the United States and Europe (and Great Britain, in particular) vis-à-vis their counterparts in the Global South. These are: the modern university as a Western tradition; the dominance of the English language; the uneven distribution of research capacities; the control over knowledge dissemination; and the “brain drain.” That model is even more relevant today in the context of globalization and the “knowledge society.” In both cases, universities are seen as playing a critical role and thus are subjected to unprecedented scrutiny. However, as the dominance of the US institutions in the international rankings reveals, the playing field is far from even.

By projecting the Anglo-Saxon model of the elite research institution as the ideal to follow, the rankings effectively reward those institutions that most closely adhere to a set of essentially arbitrary norms (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1981). An example is the preference given to publishing in English-language journals, which favours not only English speakers but also researchers in the hard sciences, given the greater number of journals (and thus citations) in those fields. For instance, in Scopus, the database consulted by most of the main rankings, 49 per cent of citations are of publications in the life sciences and medicine, followed by the natural sciences (27 per cent) and engineering and technology (17 per cent); meanwhile, the social sciences and humanities represent just 6 per cent and 1 per cent of citations, respectively (QS, 2015). In 2015, the QS ranking introduced a weighting system to correct for some of those imbalances among research fields, but science-heavy institutions continue to have a competitive advantage (the top-ranked institution in 2020 was the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MIT) (QS, 2020).

As a result, many governments have prioritized programs in the STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and math), whose scientific output is more visible on a global scale. A key example is Brazil's Scientific Mobility Program, which spent \$3.5 billion to send more than 100,000 STEM students to study at top-ranked universities – a majority of them in the United States – between 2012 and 2017 (Caldeira, 2017).

Meanwhile, disciplines deemed less “profitable” in the global economy are suffering from neglect. In 2015, twenty-six national universities in Japan announced plans to close or scale back their humanities and social science faculties in order to “serve areas that better meet society’s needs” (Grove, 2015). The move affected programs in nearly half the sixty national universities offering such courses.

Furthermore, the rankings have both highlighted and exacerbated the inequalities among institutions and national systems (Marginson, 2016). For instance, highly placed institutions are more likely to attract international scholars and students, an indicator that in turn increases their standing in the QS and THE rankings. The same is true in the case of government funding strategies. As we will show further on in this chapter, many governments divert scarce funding towards their most highly ranked institutions, in a bid to improve their standing, in turn bolstering the prestige of the country’s higher education system on a regional or global level. The result is a manifestation of the “Matthew effect,” in which the rules of the game tend to favour past winners, further increasingly their power and prestige.

The competitive logic of the rankings is in turn a reflection of broader neo-liberal policies, first championed by the United States and Britain in the 1980s and later adopted by governments throughout the world. These include major reductions in government funding and the decline of the public sphere

in general (Boggs, 1997; Pusser, 2012), which has been replaced by notions of individual responsibility and what Slaughter and Leslie (1999) have termed “academic capitalism.” Other changes include the new “audit culture” (Apple, 2007), flexibility and quality control, diminished institutional autonomy, and increased emphasis on knowledge production and industry collaboration. The emphasis on accountability has fuelled societal demands for access to information in both the public and private spheres. As a result, universities have faced growing pressure to develop instruments to measure, classify, and track their performance in academic and administrative areas (Bolseguí & Fuguet, 2006; Elliott, 2002; Power, 1997).

The new administrative logic has also weakened traditional academic hierarchies and communities, while undermining collegial bodies and practices. Other changes in recent decades include the massification of enrolments, the indiscriminate dissemination of knowledge via the internet, and the incorporation of non-university institutions, particularly those operating for profit, into broader higher education systems (Ordorika & Rodríguez, 2010). In that context, rankings have introduced new, external measures of academic hierarchy. The shift has profound implications, including a loss of autonomy for individual institutions and higher education systems and a tendency towards the homogenization of priorities and goals, at the expense of locally determined agendas.

Proponents of the rankings argue that this shift is both necessary and desirable. In their view, it is in the interest of higher education institutions, governments, publishers, scientific communities, and other relevant actors to agree on classification criteria that are based on common ideals and academic values in order to compete in the global knowledge economy (Ordorika & Rodríguez, 2010). In reality, however, the ranking methodologies are steeped in the norms and values of the dominant cultures. Central to those values is the cult of “meritocracy,” in which outcomes are confused with intrinsic worth (whether on an individual or institutional level), at the expense of equality and equity (Marginson, 2016).

Critics of the rankings, meanwhile, argue the need for culturally sensitive approaches to evaluating the quality of institutions, ones that consider regional and national higher education traditions. In Latin America, where scholars and university rectors have criticized the influence of the rankings in shaping government policies (*Final Declaration*, 2012), there is a long tradition of “state-building universities” (Ordorika & Pusser, 2007). While such institutions have played a key role in designing government institutions, training government workers, and tackling national problems, their contributions are not considered in the rankings. An alternative in the US context is the *Washington Monthly* ranking, which rates universities based on “what they do for the country”; indicators include the percentage of low-income students and those enrolled in

military training programs, as well as graduation rates for federal grant recipients (*Washington Monthly*, 2018).

The main international rankings also fuel the privatizing trend in higher education worldwide, by rewarding attributes that are characteristic of the top private institutions in the United States: high tuition and large endowments; highly competitive selection processes, for both students and faculty; and a heavy emphasis on research, ideally leading to industrial patents and other profit-making ventures (Ordorika & Lloyd, 2013). It is no coincidence that only one public institution – the University of California–Los Angeles – made it into the top twenty spots in the 2021 edition of *U.S. News & World Report's* National University Rankings, the grandfather of the national league tables (*U.S. News*, 2020). The same can be said for the majority of the international rankings; almost without exception, they are dominated by private institutions or public ones that charge far higher tuitions than their private counterparts in the developing world. For example, tuition (not counting room and board) at Berkeley (\$14,300) and Oxford (\$12,100) is more than twice that of the most expensive private universities in Mexico (University of California, Berkeley, 2020; Oxford University, 2020; *Universia*, 2020).

In some cases, the rankings have adopted an explicit stance in favour of private higher education. When analysing the outcome of their 2012 ranking of Latin American universities, the producers of QS cited the increasing presence of private universities among the top spots as the key to Brazil's dominance in the line-up. According to the company's analysis:

Private investment in education seems to be the most reasonable way of increasing the proportion of overall national income invested in education. Likewise, collaborations between the private sector and higher education institutions, as well as the strengthening of connections between curriculum design and employers' requirements, should be perceived as important tools for improving productivity and creating more opportunities for enrolment in good quality tertiary education. (QS, 2012)

It is a ringing – and largely misleading – endorsement of the market's role in higher education. QS overlooks the fact that two-thirds of enrolment in Brazil is already concentrated in the private sector, much of it in poor-quality, for-profit institutions, while the bulk of research continues to be conducted in the public sector (Lloyd, 2013a). Furthermore, the company does not explain the discrepancy between its results and those of the Brazilian government or the other international rankings, in which the country's public institutions consistently occupy the top spots. For example, of the 179 graduate programs that earned a top score in the government rating system in 2017, only 14 were located at private universities (*O Globo*, 2017).

By recommending still greater private investment in the country's higher education system, the ranking company is staking its ground in one of the most critical debates facing the sector today: whether higher education constitutes a public or a private good. The implications of that policy trend extend far beyond higher education, encompassing the role of government and the state in promoting collective societal goals.

The rankings' methodologies also reflect an ideological shift within the United States in the post-Fordist period, with the demise of the welfare state and the introduction of individualistic and market-driven policies (Tauss, 2012). John Dewey's once-prevalent view of education as serving to promote upward mobility, democratic values, and social cohesion has been replaced by a new "neoliberal common sense in education" (Torres, 2013), whose main role is to fuel economic development by producing workers and technology for the new knowledge economy. As a result, universities are encouraged to prioritize research above other missions, such as teaching and outreach – a focus that is in turn rewarded by the rankings.

In that context, many states and institutions face pressure to conform to the US model, pushing them into conflict with their national and local priorities (Pusser, 2012). Those governments that aspire to see their universities appear among the top 100 in the international rankings must consider the economic and social implications. Almost without exception, the most highly ranked institutions are those with annual budgets exceeding \$1 billion (Hazelkorn, 2008) and which derive at least part of their funding from private sources.

However, there is heated debate among academics and policymakers as to the pertinence and cost of attempting to transform institutions in the Global South into "world-class universities," a term favoured by the Shanghai Ranking and the World Bank (Salmi, 2009). As Altbach argued in 2003,

A realistic and objective perspective is needed when thinking about world-class institutions of higher learning. For most countries, even large and relatively wealthy ones, only one or two world-class universities are possible or even desirable. For many countries, a world-class university is beyond the ability of the nation to support. Research universities are at the pinnacle of a differentiated academic system in a country – the rest of the system is just as important as its top. (p. 7)

Those arguments are even more relevant today, as a growing number of countries have set explicit goals for establishing world-class universities. Examples include economic powerhouses like Germany and France, the emerging BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), East Asian countries such as Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan, and even poorer countries such as Vietnam, Ghana, and Nigeria (Andoh, 2017; *The Economist*, 2018). In justifying channelling an ever-larger share of funding to a few leading institutions, many

governments have cited their countries' poor showing in the international rankings – as if the classification tables were a goal unto themselves.

There are some exceptions, however. In Brazil, for instance, the left-leaning governments of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–10) and Dilma Rousseff (2011–16) invested billions of dollars in a bid to increase both quality and equity across the entire higher education system (Lloyd, 2017). While not the explicit goal, those efforts helped cement the dominance of Brazilian institutions in the regional rankings; Brazilian institutions occupied seven of the top ten spots in the most recent *Times Higher Education* ranking for Latin America (*Times Higher Education* [THE], 2020).

### **Cultural Imperialism and Hegemony**

At the root of the rankings' influence are their claims of objectivity. As previously mentioned, a majority relies heavily on internationally recognized measures of research production, such as the number of scholarly articles included in the Web of Science or Elsevier's Scopus databases. However, even those measures, which are clearly biased towards English-language publications, reflect the hegemony of the US higher education model – and of its elite institutions in particular. As Young (1990) argues in her defence of the “politics of difference,” such “claims to impartiality feed cultural imperialism by allowing the particular experience and perspective of privileged groups to parade as universal” (p. 10).

In addition to political clout, cultural imperialism yields considerable economic rewards. By establishing themselves as the global standard-bearers, the institutions benefit from increasing numbers of foreign students and researchers; that trend, which has continued despite the Trump administration's anti-immigrant policies, in turn augments American institutions' prestige internationally. During the 2018–19 academic year, the number of foreign students attending US universities surpassed 1.1 million (Institute for International Education, 2019). Of those, more than half came from China (33.7 per cent) and India (18.4 per cent), emerging economies that have pumped billions of dollars into revamping their higher education systems, in part through training future academics and professionals in the world's top-ranked institutions.

In the case of China, the strategy is starting to pay off in terms of the increasing flow of international students to the country; between 2011 and 2016, the number of international students nearly doubled, from 292,000 to 443,000, and the number of long-term students more than quadrupled, from 75,000 to 333,000, according to official government statistics (China Power, 2018). Yet the US economy remains the biggest winner in the internationalization market; foreign students contributed an estimated \$41 billion to the US economy in 2018–19 (National Association for Student Affairs Professionals, 2019).



However, it would be a mistake to interpret the adoption of the ranking paradigm as an intentional strategy or imposition on the part of policymakers in Washington or London. The process by which the systems have been normalized and replicated throughout the world is actually much subtler and thus harder to counteract. We argue that the hegemony of the rankings paradigm derives primarily from its incorporation into the dominant discourses within each society, through its adoption by government and university policymakers, the media, and the public at large.

While some countries have adopted alternative institutional paradigms, such as the Indigenous or intercultural universities created over the past two decades in Canada, Mexico, Bolivia, Ecuador, and elsewhere, such institutions remain the exception and face considerable hurdles. In Ecuador, for instance, the government closed down the Amawtay Wasi Intercultural University for Indigenous Peoples and Nations in 2013, arguing that it did not comply with minimum accreditation standards. The university reopened in 2018 after changing its status from a private to a public institution, bringing it under greater government control and scrutiny (Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de Ecuador, 2018).

In higher education, hegemony is established through the construction of dominant views, as well as the framing of the field and its accepted discourses and notions. This occurs in a complex interaction between formal and cultural political processes and government and economic relations, both within institutions and in broader national and international contexts.

Institutions in the strongest countries exercise power by forming widespread understandings of the nature and role of higher education, acceptable outcomes and processes, and the prevailing standards and norms. They frame the field itself, determining the conditions of interaction and the terms of competition. (Marginson & Ordorika, 2011 p. 82)

To the degree to which rankings inform government decisions about higher education, they “serve as a key source of power and legitimacy in broader state contests” (Pusser & Marginson, 2012, p. 98). At the same time, the rankings adopt a “disciplinary role” towards institutions that fall outside the established guidelines. This occurs through

encouraging institutions in those nations – despite differences in resources, stage of development, national histories, traditions, languages, and cultures – to adopt the template of the globally dominant universities that lead rankings: comprehensive research-intensive institutions with selective admissions, emphasizing science and technology and elite professional schools. (Pusser & Marginson, 2012, p. 106)

The choice of indicators, in turn, reflects the dominant values systems that guide the US political and economic models. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999) describe the process by which US values are projected as global standard-bearers:

Thanks to a symbolic inversion based on the naturalization of the schemata of neo-liberal thought, whose dominance has been imposed for some 20 years by the relentless sniping of conservative think tanks and their allies in the political and journalistic fields ... the refashioning of social relations and cultural practices in advanced societies after the US pattern – founded on the pauperization of the state, the commodification of public goods and the generalization of social insecurity – is nowadays accepted with resignation as the inevitable outcome of the evolution of nations, when it is not celebrated with a sheepish enthusiasm. (p. 42)

By adopting the criteria and results of the rankings, higher education institutions and government policymakers are affording them legitimacy, in turn paving the way for their wider adoption by society at large. At the same time, they are legitimizing their own value systems, in which certain aspects of a university's function – namely research production – are more highly prized than others.

We further argue that the naturalization of the rankings discourse is an example of *symbolic violence*, by which “the dominant apply to the relations of domination categories constructed from the point of view of the dominators, in that way making them appear natural” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 50). Like hegemony, the concept of symbolic violence points to the role of peripheral nations in adopting the rankings' logic. Under that perspective, rather than helpless victims of the “rankings game,” national policymakers are active participants in accepting and reinforcing the US model of higher education. While government and institutional policymakers in the Global South have expressed frustration over the hegemonic influence of the rankings in international forums (Ambrus, 2012), higher education policies in most of those countries continue to reflect the influence of the rankings' paradigm. Examples include merit-pay systems for faculty and institutional funding mechanisms linked to scientific output, which have been adopted by many Latin American countries in recent years; such systems reward scientific output above teaching, in keeping with the rankings' methodologies (Lloyd, 2018c).

The motivation behind the Academic Ranking of World Universities serves to illustrate this argument. While the ranking emerged in China, far from the centre of US economic and political influence, its creators were inspired by a desire to emulate the leading American universities. The campaign, which had the backing of the Chinese government, reflects the increasing global competition for students and professors, as well as the growing importance of higher education as an engine for economic development in the knowledge economy

(Marginson & Ordorika, 2011). As we will see in the following section, the new quest to create “world-class” universities, which in turn place highly in the rankings, has important implications for national policies in many countries, particularly those in the Global South.

## Rankings and National Higher Education Policies

One key area in which the rankings have become contentious elements in the struggle for cultural hegemony is in government policymaking. Countries such as China, France, Russia, Brazil, Ecuador, and Peru are using the results of the rankings as justification for implementing sweeping reforms to their higher education systems, or to justify reforms that are already under way. In most cases, the changes follow neo-liberal policy trends in the United States, including a reduction in state funding for universities, and the adoption of accreditation systems and incentives linked to research production. Many governments are also using the results to condition access to study-abroad scholarships and work visas – policies which have generated a backlash in some countries.

### The Policy Debate in Europe

The rankings race has also had a major impact in regions with well-established higher education systems, such as Europe. In France, a country with one of the world’s oldest university traditions, the hierarchical systems have fuelled highly controversial reforms. In February 2018, the French Parliament approved changes to admissions policies for the country’s seventy public universities, introducing an element of selection for the first time in more than 100 years. Previously, all high school graduates who sat for the university entrance exam, known as the *baccalauréat*, were guaranteed access to public higher education. The policy is the most visible symbol of the country’s commitment to “education for all,” which in turn represents one of the most important gains of the French Revolution. However, the government has justified the changes, citing dropout rates of 60 per cent, overcrowding, and the institutions’ poor showing in the international rankings (Lloyd, 2018a). The new Law for Student Orientation and Success sparked massive student protests starting in early 2018, with dozens of universities or faculties partially blocked or occupied as of May that year (*The Local*, 2018). Critics accuse the government of abandoning hard-fought social gains in favour of pro-market policies (Lloyd, 2018a).

A key element driving the government decision was the fact that only one French university finished in the top 100 in the 2018 THE ranking: Paris Science and Letters was ranked seventy-second (THE, 2018). The university was founded in 2010 by combining nine existing research centres and professional schools in Paris. The move formed part of a government campaign dating back

at least a decade to create world-class research universities by melding existing institutions into larger entities and channelling millions of dollars into funding graduate research programs. Those efforts seemed to pay off, with three French universities finishing in the top 100 in the 2020 THE ranking, while Paris Science and Letters moved up to the forty-fifth spot, followed by the Sorbonne University (eightieth) and the École Polytechnique (ninety-third) (THE, 2020b).

Similarly, in Russia, the government of President Vladimir Putin embarked on an ambitious reform of the country's higher education system starting in 2012, including through the merging of existing institutions and the closure of others, in a bid to improve the system's international reputation. Officials announced plans to condition where students awarded study-abroad grants could attend university, based on a list of 210 qualifying institutions. Other strategies include investing in a select group of Russian universities and recruiting top talent, in hopes of improving the institutions' standing in the rankings (Nemtsova, 2012).

Russia has also devised its own national and international university rankings to counteract the influence of the international tables. The international ranking, which was first conducted in 2017, does not take into account reputational indicators, which Russian officials deem biased in favour of the most well-known institutions (namely those in the United States and Britain). It also assigns greater weight to teaching and student performance (as opposed to research) and attempts to measure universities' interaction with society. Another key difference: the ranking gives priority to institutions in Japan, China, Brazil, India, Iran, Turkey, and members of the Commonwealth of Independent States, a confederation of ten post-Soviet republics (IREG Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence, 2017; *SI News*, 2016).

In justifying the move in 2012, the Russian education minister, Andrei Fursenko, argued that the rankings are an "instrument of competitive battle and influence" and thus should not be monopolized (Kishkovsky, 2012). A total of thirteen Russian universities appeared in the top 200 of the inaugural Moscow International University Ranking in 2017, compared with just one in the ARWU ranking and none in the THE ranking (Academic Ranking of World Universities, 2017; THE, 2017). However, the top five institutions were still the traditional standard-bearers: Harvard, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Stanford, Yale, and Cambridge, in that order (IREG Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence, 2017).

The new internationalization push, in particular, has sparked heated criticism from within Russian academe, with faculty arguing that the country would be better served by investing in its native talent. By 2016, the government was forced to scale back the scope of the reforms due to resistance from affected institutions. At the centre of the debate is lingering mistrust within the Russian

establishment of Western – and in particular US – cultural dominance in the post–Cold War era.

The rankings have also fuelled policy changes in other key areas, such as immigration. In Denmark, the government evaluates candidates for work visas depending on whether they attended a highly ranked university. Applicants whose alma mater was in the top 100 of the QS ranking receive 20 points (out of a total of 130 points assigned to educational qualifications) – up from 15 points in 2012 (Rauhvargers, 2013; [Workpermit.com](http://Workpermit.com), 2018). Meanwhile, those who attended lower-ranked institutions receive fewer points, on a sliding scale. The Netherlands uses a similar system in awarding special “orientation year” permits, which allow holders of undergraduate or graduate degrees from top-ranked universities to temporarily reside in the country while looking for work ([Expatica.com](http://Expatica.com), 2020; Rauhvargers, 2013). Beneficiaries must have attended a university ranked in the top 200 in any of the three main rankings or an accredited Dutch institution.

### The “World-Class” Movement in Asia

Another region where the rankings are shaping higher education policy is East and Southeast Asia. In recent years, the governments of China, Japan, India, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam, among others, have announced campaigns to create “world-class” universities, in a clear nod to the rankings paradigm. In some cases, such as Malaysia, government officials have made explicit references to the systems in justifying diverting an ever-greater share of government funding to a select group of institutions. What Marginson (2011) has termed the Confucian model of higher education in East Asia – heavy (sometimes authoritarian) state control and highly competitive admissions processes based on a unified national test – has enabled governments in the region to enact sweeping reforms with little resistance from the academic community.

Within this group, the Chinese campaign is by far the most ambitious in terms of scope and investment. In 2017, Beijing officials announced the goal of establishing ten “world-class” universities by 2020 and sixteen top institutions by 2030. Already, some eleven provincial universities have raised close to \$6.4 billion towards the project (*People’s Daily Online*, 2017).

The country first announced the goal of developing “world-class” universities in 1995, through its 211 Project involving the top 100 universities. The number of targeted universities was reduced to forty in 1995 under Project 985. Since then, the country’s higher education system has both expanded and become increasingly stratified along regional and socio-economic lines (Morgan & Wu, 2014). This is partly due to the increasing cost of attending the leading universities. Tuition fees, which were nonexistent prior to the 1980s, have more than

doubled since 2000, from around \$800 per year to between \$2,000 and \$4,000 in 2014 (Morgan & Wu, 2014). However, government efforts to address inequality by establishing quotas for poor, rural students starting in 2016 have met with fierce resistance from families in urban centres (Hui Feng, 2016).

## The Dispute in Latin America

The rankings have had an even more polarizing impact in Latin America, due to the region's long tradition of free, public higher education and resistance to US imperialism (political, economic, and military, as well as cultural) (Ordorika, 2018). The conflict has played out in the rankings' explicit or implicit preference for private universities, which has in turn fuelled calls for increasing private investment in the sector in countries such as Mexico and Colombia. Although initially the top-ranked universities in Latin America were virtually all public, private universities have fared well in the new regional rankings; in the 2020 THE Latin America ranking, the private Pontifical Catholic University of Chile topped the list, while the private Monterrey Institute for Technology and Higher Education in Mexico (ranked fourth) surpassed the National Autonomous University of Mexico (seventeenth), which for years was the region's top-ranked institution (THE, 2020a). The shift reflects the growing weight within the rankings' methodologies of reputational surveys and the degree of internationalization – indicators that favour well-endowed private institutions.

Meanwhile, the rankings do not measure the institutions' role as “state-building” institutions (Ordorika & Pusser, 2007) – a contribution that is difficult, if not impossible, to quantify. In Latin America, public universities, in particular, have played a key role in the economic and social development of their respective nations: by training a majority of the professional workforce, designing state institutions, tackling pressing development problems, and providing a wide array of community service and cultural programs (Ordorika & Pusser, 2007). That model took root a century ago, as a result of the 1918 Córdoba Reform movement in Argentina, triggering similar student-led movements as far north as Mexico. The result was a distinctive Latin American model of higher education, infused with the principles of autonomy, democracy, and “an active institutional compromise [*sic*] with social progress” (Arocena & Sutz, 2005, p. 581).

However, the “state-building” tradition has come under increasing attack in recent years. Governments throughout Latin America have seized on the region's relatively poor showing in the international tables – with just half a dozen universities listed in the top 500 – to justify implementing or accelerating neo-liberal reforms to their higher education systems. This is true even in the case of self-declared leftist governments, such as those in place in Ecuador and

Peru during the second decade of the twenty-first century; both countries have recently pushed through controversial higher education laws, arguing the need to make their institutions more competitive on a global level.

In the case of Ecuador, legislation passed in 2010 required all university professors to hold PhDs within a decade, despite the fact that at the time only one university in the country offered doctoral degrees (Lloyd, 2010). The law also created a new academic accrediting agency and increased federal control over the university system. Critics accused then president Rafael Correa, who holds a PhD in economics from the University of Illinois, of uncritically mimicking US policies while failing to take into account local realities and priorities (Lloyd, 2010).

Similarly, in 2013, the Peruvian Congress approved a controversial set of reforms to the higher education law, including mandatory accreditation of all universities and programs, the creation of a new federal agency to oversee higher education, and a moratorium on the creation of new universities until new quality controls were in place (Lloyd, 2013b). Opponents, including the National Rectors Assembly and the Federation of Peruvian Students, accused the government of seeking to undermine hard-fought university autonomy under the guise of quality assurance.

Governments in many Latin American countries are also using the rankings to determine where students can study abroad on government grants. Those policies are particularly significant in the case of Brazil, Chile, and Ecuador, which have sent record numbers of students overseas over the past decade in a bid to increase their countries' research capacity. However, critics note that by restricting students to the top-ranked institutions – a majority of which are in the United States – governments are unnecessarily raising the costs of such programs. For example, the Ecuadoran government announced plans in 2012 to spend up to \$250,000 per student for the first 2,000 applicants admitted to universities ranked among the top 50 (Associated Press, 2012), far more than the cost of a comparable degree in Europe. In Brazil, meanwhile, a financial and political crisis prompted the government to end the Science Mobility Program in 2017. The program had already come under fire for its exorbitant costs, which included millions of dollars spent on English-language courses at foreign universities, to prepare students to undergo studies in the United States and Britain. Like such exchange programs in many countries, Brazil had also conditioned which universities students could attend based on their standing in the main international rankings.

### **Resistance to the Rankings**

The role of the rankings in dictating government policies has not gone uncontested. In May 2012, dozens of university rectors from throughout Latin America, higher education experts, and representatives from the ranking institutions

convened in Mexico City for the conference “Latin American Universities and the International Rankings: Impact, Scope, and Limits.” Many of the conference participants voiced concerns over the systems’ outsized influence in determining government policies.

Many of their arguments were outlined in the conference’s Final Declaration,<sup>1</sup> a ten-page critical analysis of the ranking paradigm and its impact on Latin America:

The bias toward the Anglo-Saxon research university model does not permit universities in the region to compete on an even footing with their counterparts in more economically developed nations ... The result is a bias against the universities in Latin America and their scientific publications. Finally, there are enormous differences in the amount of investment in higher education and scientific research in different countries, which is the single most important element in determining the presence of institutions in the rankings. (*Final Declaration 2012*, p. 4)

The document reiterated concerns voiced at previous international forums, in which Latin America has occupied a central role. They include the IV Meeting of University Networks and Councils of Chancellors in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in April 2011, which was sponsored by IESALC, UNESCO’s higher education institute for Latin America; and the UNESCO Global Forum on Rankings and Accountability in Higher Education: Uses and Misuses, held in Paris, which drew together more than 250 delegates from sixty-eight countries.

There are examples of a counter trend in Latin America, where governments are seeking to expand access to higher education for underprivileged groups. In 2015, then Chilean president Michelle Bachelet announced plans to provide free higher education for the poorest 40 per cent of students, ending decades in which the country had among the most expensive higher education systems in the world. Bachelet was responding to massive demonstrations from 2011 to 2014, which finally brought down her predecessor, the conservative Sebastián Piñera (Lloyd, 2018b).

Similarly, over the past seventeen years, Brazil has implemented the most sweeping affirmative action policies in the Western hemisphere for Afro-Brazilian and low-income students. Those efforts culminated with the federal Quota Law passed in 2012, requiring the country’s sixty-three federal universities – which tend to be among the country’s top institutions of higher education – to reserve half of all their spots for graduates of public high schools and Afro-Brazilians by 2017. The law sparked widespread opposition, with critics warning that it would negatively impact the academic level of the institutions, not to mention their place in the rankings. The policies reflect competing views of the role of higher education institutions in the twenty-first century, particularly within the Global South.



## Final Considerations

After just a decade, or several in the US context, the rankings have established themselves as a new sort of gatekeeper of higher education, a form of bureaucratic certification that has become the norm in both the private and public sectors (Post et al., 2013). This widespread adoption of international rankings has occurred through a complex process of consensual and, at the same time, reluctant acquiescence. So entrenched is the paradigm that governments from around the world, and across the political spectrum, have seized on their universities' relatively weak showing in the rankings to justify bold higher education reforms. These include such upcoming economic powerhouses as Brazil, Russia, India, and China, which, despite challenging US hegemony, have internalized many of the dominant cultural messages implicit in the US-led neo-liberal project. Those envision higher education as a competitive marketplace, with a sole dominant model to which all institutions should aspire.

There is also considerable opposition to the ranking paradigm in virtually every region of the world. In Africa, a case not discussed in this chapter, critics are questioning the logic of pursuing the "world-class" university model, given serious material and human resources constraints. However, those critiques often fall on unresponsive ears amid the persistent drumbeat of the hegemonic discourse.

In this chapter, we have analysed the debate over rankings as a reflection of the underlying power dynamics in higher education, which we view as a highly contested and competitive field. We have also shown how the hierarchical systems serve as agents of what Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999) call US-based "cultural imperialism." Legitimized and propagated by international policymakers and the media, the rankings impose a set of largely arbitrary norms, conceived in a specific cultural context, as universal standards to be adopted on a global scale. The process is a form of *symbolic violence*, in which the subordinate actors adopt and internalize the world view of the dominant players (in this case, the neo-liberal policy agenda) as natural and unavoidable (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1999).

As we have shown, the internalization of this neo-liberal logic has far-reaching consequences for institutions and governments, particularly in Latin America and other developing regions. By encouraging governments and institutions to divert funding to a select group of institutions, in a bid to compete in the "rankings race," the model further exacerbates inequalities in developing nations and the world at large. Marginson (2016) sums up the impact of the competitive logic ingrained in the US-led model of higher education:

The shape of higher education systems is being "stretched" vertically – the university hierarchy is getting steeper. Worldwide there is the ever-growing emphasis on "world-class universities." Every nation, it seems, now wants its own version

of the American science multiversity, the kind of institution that figures in global rankings, but is less concerned with achieving Nordic quality in broadly accessible forms of higher education.

Such trends form part of broader changes under way on an international scale. Decades of neo-liberal reforms coupled with the forces of globalization have led to greater levels of inequality in most countries (Picketty, 2014). Meanwhile, in higher education, the neo-liberal logic can be viewed in the erosion of the Nordic commitment to social equality and the demise of the concepts of “education for all” in France and the “state-building” universities in Latin America.

The emergence of the international rankings nearly two decades ago has accelerated those trends by reinforcing the “meritocratic” discourse in higher education, at the expense of the goals of equity and social justice. Finally, the hegemonic logic behind the rankings has perhaps the greatest impact on the countries who can afford it the least.

## NOTE

1 The English version of the Final Declaration is available online at <http://www.encuentro-rankings.unam.mx/Documentos/Final-declaration-english.pdf>.

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