


Chapter 8

International University Rankings' Influence on the Stakeholder Relationships of Three Universities in Brazil

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of international university rankings on the University of São Paulo (USP), São Paulo State University (UNESP), and University of Campinas (UNICAMP), utilising stakeholder theory to interpret university managers' perspectives and dialogues. The research reveals that these rankings, whilst not significantly affecting the financial stability of these institutions, notably shape public and political perceptions of their quality and legitimacy. Additionally, the rankings play a pivotal role in forging university partnerships. Importantly, the study finds that rankings also impact the methods of institutional data collection and organisation, albeit with limited effect on the universities' societal engagement and decision-making processes. This highlights a nuanced impact of rankings, in-

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fluencing both perception and administrative practices, yet not fully capturing the social relevance of these institutions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since their emergence in the early 2000s, international university rankings have increasingly gained prominence and space in Higher Education (HE) debates. They have now a wide impact on several stakeholders of universities, with a powerful influence on students and policymakers, as well as other higher education institutions (HEIs). They affect the decisions of students about where to study and how much they are willing to pay for education (Thiengo et al., 2018; Tozini, 2017). In policies, they influence how governments distribute funds for HEIs (Parker, 2013; Vieira & Lima, 2016; Santos & Noronha, 2016; Thiengo et al., 2018), and how they evaluate universities (Finardi & Guimarães, 2017; Thiengo et al., 2018; Vanz et al., 2018).

International university rankings also influence how decisions are made inside HEIs. One study conducted with 171 HEIs in Europe found that 86% of the institutions monitored their position on rankings (Hazelkorn, Loukkola & Zhang, 2014), and “over 70% of respondents said they used rankings to inform strategic, organisational, managerial or academic actions” (Hazelkorn, 2014). This means, “HEIs are increasingly altering their management to meet ranking criteria, to increase their scores and consequently attract more students and public and private funds” (Righetti, 2016, p.137). Many universities have integrated rankings in their strategic plans and have created institutional research units to monitor rankings results and devise strategies to change their positions (Hazelkorn, 2009; Altbach & Hazelkorn, 2017; Buela-Casal et al., 2007).

While rankings have been widely researched in the past 15 years, the aspect of managers' perspectives on rankings is still under-researched. There is a lack of case studies to understand the influence of rankings inside the university, from the perspective of those who work and lead those institutions, going beyond the analysis of institutional documents. Some previous studies that focus on managers' perceptions about university rankings highlight that views of rankings within universities can be varied and not unified (Kehm, 2016, p.88). Some studies also highlight regional differences in rankings attitudes, with Latin American university leaders being mentioned as often critical or sceptical about international university rankings (Bernasconi & Véliz, 2016, p.49). Leaders are also frequently hesitant to put rankings as a direct goal of their institution (Bernasconi & Véliz, 2016).

This research aims to explore how international university rankings affect the University of São Paulo (USP), São Paulo State University (UNESP), and University of Campinas (UNICAMP), three vital universities in Brazil, through the discourse

and perceptions of their managers. Collectively, these institutions contribute to approximately a third of Brazil's scientific output (Marques, 2019). Their efforts to enhance international standing include a keen focus on their positions in global rankings. This study delves into how university leaders perceive the influence of these rankings, particularly in relation to stakeholder engagement. The research is guided by specific sub-questions:

- Do managers believe that rankings influence their relationship with funding sources?
- Are rankings perceived as affecting the university's interactions with key external stakeholders, such as government bodies and society at large?
- How does the internal university community, primarily academics and staff, view the impact of rankings, and what potential risks do they associate with these metrics?
- In what ways are rankings integrated into university management and operations, if at all?

The aim is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of university rankings in shaping the internal and external dynamics of these leading Brazilian universities.

2. METHODOLOGY

To answer the proposed research questions, this study follows a qualitative approach with a collection of case studies of the three state universities of São Paulo. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with managers at the selected universities. The interviewees were chosen based on purposeful sampling, “based on places and people that can best help us understand our central phenomenon” (Creswell, 2011, p. 205). The managers included in the interviewee groups were mostly top and mid-level managers, including the rectors of each of the chosen universities, as well as the directors of the planning units and the coordinators of the units that monitor rankings and control indicators as those three key managers should be the most directly involved in using university rankings. The final group that participated in the research included two managers from the University of São Paulo (USP), four from the University of Campinas (UNICAMP), and three from São Paulo State University (UNESP). Since the data collection involved Brazilian participants, this research followed the guidelines of the National Commission of Research Ethics (CEP/CONEP). The project was submitted for evaluation in June

2020, and the ethics committee approved the research plan in August 2020 with no remarks. The process can be tracked using the following code: 35847820.1.0000.0077.

3. THEORETICAL APPROACH

The research uses stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) to frame the analysis, which will help understand how managers perceive the effects of rankings on stakeholders of the university, and what actions universities might take to manage the impact of rankings in their relationship with key stakeholders.

The earlier definitions of stakeholders present in the literature of Stakeholder Theory present them as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the firm's objectives” (Freeman, 1984, p.25). There are stakeholders within the organisation itself (internal), such as employees, and outside (external) stakeholders, such as customers, business partners, local communities, governments, and more (Fontaine et al., 2006). Managers can be considered stakeholders by some authors, or they can embody the organisation’s actions and responsibilities (Fontaine et al., 2006). In this research, while the managers are in a position to understand the organisation, they are also internal stakeholders because high management in the state universities of São Paulo is generally composed of academics elected by the university community. Therefore, while they might ideally act as an embodiment of the organisation, the managers interviewed are not disconnected from their identities as university professors, and thus their perceptions of university rankings are directly linked to the university’s relation with academics as an internal stakeholder.

When applied to studies in higher education, stakeholder theory considers how universities are managed both in the sense of stakeholders’ rights, benefits, and participation and in keeping organisational survival (Fontaine et al., 2006). Managers would be expected to identify, understand, and organise the stakeholders of their organisations, which involves “mapping the stakeholders, providing a detailed list of the specific groups and companies related to each category of stakeholders, and a corresponding list of interests” (Fontaine et al., 2006, p. 18).

Stakeholder theory can be seen from a descriptive point of view, as well as an instrumental and normative point of view. This means that the theory can be used to describe organisational practice (descriptive), to suggest a way to achieve organisational goals (instrumental) and to provide guidelines for the functioning of an organisation (normative) (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). For this research, the use of Stakeholder Theory is mainly descriptive, meaning it will be used as the framework to describe how university managers perceive the uses and impacts of rankings in their university.

Stakeholder theory also proposes for each stakeholder group to be further classified based on their level of support to the organisation and how the organisation should act towards them (Fontaine et al., 2006). This addition to how organisations think about their stakeholders brings the concepts of power, related to the level of influence of a stakeholder, legitimacy, related to the perception that that group's actions are desirable and appropriate, and urgency, related to the need for immediate action (Mitchell et al., 1997, Kohtamaki, 2015; Jongbloed, Enders & Salerno, 2008). These attributes are referred to as stakeholder salience, and they determine how organisations prioritise stakeholders (Kohtamaki, 2015), as the more a stakeholder possesses these three attributes, the more managers in an organisation perceive the necessity of acting towards them (Jongbloed et al., 2008).

4. RESULTS

a. University Rankings and University Funding

In many countries, university rankings have significant implications for universities' relationships with key resource providers, as shown in the literature review (Thiengo et al., 2018; Monks & Ehrenberg, 1999; Hazelkorn, 2009; Tozini, 2017; Righetti, 2016; Parker, 2013; Vieira & Lima, 2016; Santos & Noronha, 2016). These rankings influence decisions related to attracting fee-paying students, forming partnerships with other organisations, and even shaping government policies that use rankings as indicators.

However, in the context of Brazil, international university rankings do not directly impact how public universities, such as USP, UNESP, and UNICAMP, relate to their main resource providers, primarily the state of São Paulo. The funding for these universities mainly comes from the state, and the interviews with university officials show that rankings have not led to changes in their budgets or funding allocations.

With rankings not directly impacting their main funding sources, this funding model provides a level of independence for the universities, safeguarding them from an exaggerated influence of rankings on their activities. This is viewed as positive, especially considering that rankings' chosen indicators may not always align with the universities' goals, and this independence allows institutions to use more relevant indicators (Oliveira, 2018).

However, the stability of this funding model is being questioned due to threats and attacks on public universities in Brazil from politicians and certain societal groups. While funding is currently guaranteed, the interviews with managers revealed a sense of uncertainty about the future, highlighting the need for continued dialogue

with the government and society to ensure a clear understanding of the crucial role of public universities in Brazil.

So, even though rankings don't directly impact the primary funding sources of these universities, their widespread publicity might indirectly influence politicians' and society's perceptions, making ongoing dialogue essential to secure university resources in the long term. The next section will delve into the potential role of rankings in this dialogue and their impact on university resources.

b. Rankings and University Relationships with Key Stakeholders

The state government of São Paulo and the society can be seen as the two main stakeholders of USP, UNESP, and UNICAMP, and those institutions are now devoting efforts to strengthening their relationship with these actors. University rankings are considered to have some importance in the communication with these stakeholder groups:

“When the local media or ranking companies publish results, they show how well-positioned the three universities of São Paulo are. (...) Recently the three universities participated in a parliamentary inquiry commission. They all used their ranking positions to try to show politicians their performance” (Chief Strategic Planning Advisor, UNESP).

“Rankings are an easy way for society to see universities. Whether it is right or wrong, it shows a number, and people like to see numbers. (...) So as this is published in the media, it can be important in terms of how society and the government perceive the performance of universities” (Advisor at the Vice-rectory for University Development, UNICAMP).

However, interviewees also point out the limitations of rankings as tools for communication. Misinterpretation of ranking results can have negative consequences for the dialogue (Coordinator of the Institutional Research Office, USP). The media's superficial portrayal of rankings further complicates the dialogue with society, as they often focus on numerical positions without understanding the context behind the results (Rector, UNICAMP).

“The media wants direct and easy results. So when the university goes up one position they make a big event out of it. And when it goes down it is portrayed as a horrible thing. There is a lack of understanding from the media as to what rankings actually mean. (...) The coverage is generally very superficial” (Rector, UNICAMP).

“It is important to clarify to society what rankings are. To balance this publicity around them.” (Advisor at the Vice-rectory for University Development, UNICAMP).

“Every time we interact with the general media, we try to reinforce a critical analysis of rankings. (...) What is relevant is the contextual information, not an isolated rankings result” (Coordinator of the Institutional Research Office, USP).

Besides the problem of how results are portrayed by the media, the dialogue with society is further hindered by the excessively academic indicators that say little about the direct social impact of universities:

“If a university is ranked amongst the top 100 in the world, this does say something to society. But the indicators used on rankings are still very academic. (...) Measurements of citations, of reputation, those things are directed to the academics themselves. These indicators don’t speak to the broader society outside of universities. (...) The traditional indicators used don’t translate to society what universities do” (President of the Commission for Institutional Evaluation and University Rankings, UNESP).

Despite these limitations, universities still pay attention to rankings, considering them somewhat inevitable (Altbach, 2015; Marginson, 2017). Interviewees also mentioned that rankings can evoke institutional pride and influence institutional partnerships with other higher education institutions, leading to opportunities for research collaboration, student exchange, and shared facilities.

While rankings might not be the best means of communication with the government and society, they can indirectly impact the universities by enhancing partnerships and international collaborations. Therefore, universities continue to monitor rankings as they offer tangible benefits beyond direct funding or student attraction.

c. Managers' Criticisms of Rankings

University managers in the state universities of São Paulo, who are mainly academicians elected by their peers, play a crucial role in shaping the institutions' response to university rankings. The collegial and bottom-heavy nature of universities requires considering how internal stakeholders, such as professors and employees, perceive these rankings, as it influences the university's attitude towards them. The interviewees expressed various criticisms of university rankings, consistent with

the literature, focusing on the inadequacy of certain indicators to their contexts, the biases favouring certain countries, and the lack of coverage of third mission and social indicators. The interviewees acknowledged that rankings could create tensions with the university's goals and activities, leading to potential diversion from their social roles.

While they were critical of traditional rankings, managers expressed optimism about alternative rankings, especially sustainability and multidimensional rankings like THE Impact Ranking or the U-multirank. These rankings are seen as better aligned with their institutions' missions and can provide a platform for showcasing their social and environmental efforts, which are highly relevant to Brazilian public universities.

Overall, the managers' criticisms and perspectives closely align with the literature, indicating a shared understanding of the challenges posed by university rankings and the potential benefits of embracing more relevant and inclusive alternatives.

d. Rankings as Tools for Institutional Learning

Despite the criticisms, university managers do see potential benefits in using rankings to aid institutional learning and reflection, which is also recognized in the academic literature (Oliveira, 2018; Berghoff & Federkeil, 2009).

“We value rankings from the perspective of reflection and improving our activities in the areas we deem important.” (Rector, UNESP).

“So we learn and evolve. We start to understand what is recognized. So I think rankings are important for international benchmarking” (Rector, UNICAMP).

There are many ways universities can use rankings for institutional learning, and interviewees described mainly that they provide comparison and benchmarking. Rankings are, by nature, instruments of comparison, so it is only natural that universities use them to assess their performance against that of other institutions. But while rankings normally include all universities in the same standard for comparison, when universities use rankings for their institutional learning, they can choose which institutions they should compare themselves to. Comparing with universities that share similar missions and realities allows for more meaningful insights:

“For us, rankings have this comparative aspect of having references. That is very important. (...) And we must compare similar things(...). The rankings of universities under 50 years old are very interesting to us. In this group of universities, we do stand out, we are the first in the country. So it is interesting to follow universities that are

on the same stage of development” (President of the Commission for Institutional Evaluation and University Rankings, UNESP).

“While all universities work with teaching, research, and third mission, they do it in different ways. The way those activities connect to their missions is different, so we need to learn which universities we want to be compared to.” (Responsible for rankings at the Vice-rectory for University Development, UNICAMP).

By looking at the indicators used by rankings, universities can reflect on the indicators they use in their institutional evaluations. Interviewees frequently mentioned that their internationalisation policies were strongly influenced by an analysis of their performance on rankings:

“Internationalisation at UNESP changed radically because of university rankings. In the 90s our internationalisation policies were entirely based on sending students abroad. (...) Rankings showed us that internationalisation was also about research. So rankings had a big influence on our concept of internationalisation” (Chief Strategic Planning Advisor, UNESP).

“When we look closer to university rankings, we can learn more about our own university, and develop institutional policies from this learning. One area that our university doesn't perform so well is internationalisation. (...) This is very clear on rankings. Even though we try hard we were not able so far to stand out on internationalisation performance. So that reflection was very important to design our internationalisation strategy” (President of the Commission for Institutional Evaluation and University Rankings, UNESP).

Participants also frequently reported that gathering data for ranking agencies led to improving the university's data collection and organisation policies. This phenomenon can be related to the emergence of the so-called rankings offices or institutional research units dedicated to collecting and organising the data to be provided to university rankings, and later analysing ranking results. The literature recognizes the role of those units and the more general role of rankings in data organisation within universities (Hazelkorn, 2009; Righetti, 2016; Oliveira, 2018; Berghoff & Federkeil, 2009).

“One aspect where I think rankings have been of much help is that the university had a lot of information that was not organised enough to be collected by rankings. (...) So we ended up creating new mechanisms for this. We didn't have any idea of how many international visitors our university would get, for example. (...) Now we

work to make this data collection more efficient and less bureaucratic” (Responsible for rankings at the Vice-rectory for University Development, UNICAMP).

“Participating in university rankings offered us valuable opportunities to realise that we did not have adequate tracking of certain academic performance indicators. Our university is very large (...) and many of those activities are spread in smaller units and there isn't always organised data that reaches the central administration. So once we had to provide certain data to university rankings we realised that some information that is relevant to our institution is not being measured correctly. So that is an opportunity to improve our records” (Coordinator of the Institutional Research Office, USP).

‘We already had a data bank, but there were 10 different types of data banks. One related to undergraduate studies, one to teaching, and so on. (...) They did not interrelate. (...) There is no point in keeping a patchwork of data when there are systems capable of putting them together. (...) This was influenced by rankings. Before I would have to search many different sources within the university to provide data for a specific ranking’ (Chief Strategic Planning Advisor, UNESP).

5. DISCUSSION

The study showed that there are four main stakeholder groups affected by university rankings: (1) Government (2) Media, (3) Civil Society, (4) other Universities.

The first stakeholder group mentioned in the interviews was the state government of São Paulo. Interviewees discussed how university rankings still do not have an important influence on the model of funding used by the State of São Paulo. They presented that, while current funding is stable and not related to performance on rankings, there is a general insecurity on whether this model of funding will be maintained for long, and the university is facing pressures to be more socially accountable.

The second perspective on how rankings influence the universities' relationship with the government focuses less on the concrete mechanisms of funding and brings this accountability and legitimacy aspects of the university feeling a need to prove its worth and its value. Managers noted that the politicians within the government read news regarding rankings as they are displayed by the media and that this sometimes leads to a misinterpretation of results. So while some believe that good ranking results can consolidate the quality and value of the state universities of São Paulo in the imagination of politicians, other interviewees warned about the possibility of results being incorrectly analysed. Given that Brazilian universities do not perform as well as the top North American, Asian and European universities (van der Wende & Westerheijden, 2009; Righetti, 2016; Yudkevich et al., 2016; Finardi & Guimarães,

2017; Morosini et al., 2017; Gracio et al., 2018), managers have noted that politicians might lose sight of the progress the universities have made given their context and short existence, and interpret ranking results as unsatisfactory performance.

From that emerges a second key stakeholder mentioned by managers, which is the media. This is an important stakeholder because it can affect how rankings are perceived by other key stakeholders such as politicians and the broader society. The interviewees mentioned that ranking results are often in the headlines of big newspapers in Brazil and that those tend to put too much emphasis on the position of universities in a certain year, highlighting how a certain university has gained or lost certain positions, and not promoting a more detailed debate on what those numbers actually mean.

A third stakeholder mentioned by managers was the broader society, meaning those who pay taxes to support universities but do not get direct participation as students or employees. Most managers mentioned how this part of the society has actually little interest in the indicators used by most rankings, and consequently in ranking results. For this particular group, excellence in the sense of being a world-class university is somehow less important than relevance.

The fourth and final stakeholder considered here was other universities with whom the state universities of São Paulo might establish partnerships. This was definitely the external group more influenced by university rankings from the managers' perspectives, strengthening the idea that rankings might be generally more focused on the academic community itself.

The table below summarises managers' perceptions of how rankings affect each stakeholder relationship:

Table 1. Summary of rankings' impact on stakeholder relationships

Stakeholder	Managers perceptions of rankings' effects
Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -No effect on funding agreements so far -Some effect on politicians' perception about universities -Politicians' perceptions are generally based on position numbers only, which might lead to misinterpretations -Results perceived as negative might fuel negative feelings towards investing in public universities amongst politicians
Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Results used in simplistic ways to generate catchy headlines -A loss in ranking positions is usually broadly portrait as a decrease in university performance -How the media portraits rankings influences other stakeholders
Broader Society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Generally not interested in academic indicators -Looks for relevance over excellence (in the world-class sense) -Might be attracted to sustainability rankings, but it is too soon to know
Other HEIs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Rankings frequently used to determine partnerships

Source: Formulated by the authors

Stakeholder theory highlights the need for organisations to actively manage relationships with stakeholders, in addition to understanding how rankings impact and are used by various university stakeholders. This research aims to identify impacts and explore whether universities strategically manage the effects of rankings on these relationships, considering stakeholder influence in organisational management.

While rankings do influence stakeholder relationships, the state universities of São Paulo do not appear to actively pursue better rankings to enhance these relationships. Despite the impact of rankings, interviewees did not observe strong movements from their universities to change ranking positions. In terms of universities' relationships with society, managers acknowledge the growing demand for social accountability and impact. However, traditional rankings play a minor role in strengthening this aspect, suggesting that efforts to chase better rankings may have a limited impact in this area.

Nevertheless, managers recognise the potential of sustainability rankings in enhancing societal ties, leading universities to dedicate efforts to participate in such rankings. This involves collecting and organising data on sustainability activities, a practice also seen when engaging with traditional rankings.

Aside from data organisation for better rankings, the managers also appreciate the role of rankings in assessing performance relative to certain indicators and other higher education institutions. While they are generally against changing university activities solely for improved rankings, they see rankings as a valuable tool for institutional learning, allowing universities to identify areas for improvement aligned with their mission. Therefore, managers view rankings as a means of obtaining transparent information to achieve their own goals.

The table below provides a summary of managers' reactions to university rankings:

Table 2. Universities' responses to rankings

University responses to rankings identified by managers	
Data organisation	Ensure reliable and accurate data to feed ranking agencies, including those focused on sustainability indicators.
Institutional learning	Use the information provided by rankings to learn about university performance in key areas of their mission. Generate informed changes when necessary to fulfil institutional goals.

Source: Formulated by the authors

6. CONCLUSION

This research suggests that the impact of rankings is not the same for every HEI around the world. Considering that only a small percentage of universities actually ever feature in those instruments, this research might balance the view sometimes portrayed in the literature that rankings are inevitable phenomena (Altbach, 2015; Marginson, 2017). The results presented here show that even the top-performing institutions in Brazil are still somewhat protected from the effect of rankings and that managers do not recognise a strong movement of chasing international rankings in those institutions yet. They do recognise, however, that this might change in the near future, following trends of increased accountability and marketization of HE. This perspective brings an interesting complement to the literature on rankings. Since most of the research on this topic is concentrated in Europe, North America and Asia, the particularity of how Brazilian public universities are funded adds a new dimension to the relationship of rankings on public policies. The fact that the analysed universities do not charge tuition fees and receive most of their funds from a predefined percentage of a state tax is very unique when compared to most universities in Europe, North America or Asia. The state universities of São Paulo have not experienced any type of excellence initiative that concentrates funds from the government, as have several European institutions (de Boer et al, 2017; van der Wende & Westerheijden, 2009; Douglass, 2016; Goglio & Regini, 2017).

The results of this study also show that stakeholder theory brings an important contribution to the study of HEIs and university rankings. The leadership of the universities analysed showed a significant understanding of the importance of stakeholder management for the success of their organisations. The recent challenges in legitimacy and the high dependence of universities on external funding from government entities further reinforce the need to understand stakeholder needs. The internal characteristics of governance of the state universities of São Paulo, with a focus on democratic decision-making, also means that internal stakeholders have a bigger impact than in most organisations and that no change can be made without significant support from the academic body of those universities.

This study showed that rankings are not yet important to the financial security of those universities, but they do affect how politicians perceive the quality and legitimacy of those universities. They also have an important effect on university international partnerships and are widely used by other HEIs. However, rankings have a limited impact on universities' relationship with the broader society, mainly because they remain mostly detached from indicators of social relevance. Within the universities, managers recognize that rankings have several methodological issues, but they still influence some university activities such as how institutional data is

collected and organised. They also see rankings being used internally to inform decisions on matters that are in line with their missions and goals.

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