

World-class universities or socially necessary universities? Rankings, teacher preparation and public purpose in dependent capitalism¹

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Abstract

Under the expansion of global classification systems, Latin American higher learning has been subjected to quality prescriptions produced in dominant economic centers. This article examines the contradiction between the world-class university and the socially necessary university, using teacher preparation as an index of commitment to state schooling and human formation. It asks how rankings convert bibliometric prestige into institutional command and what consequences follow for countries marked by dependent capitalism. Derived from recent research developed by the Research Group on the Political Economy of Education, the inquiry adopts a critical, theoretical, and documentary approach, reviewing Brazilian and Latin American scholarship on academic classification, autonomy, teacher preparation, far-right politics, scientific precarity, and brain drain. Guided by historical-dialectical materialism, the analysis connects comparative data from 2013 to 2022 with research on professional courses and scientific labor. The findings indicate that global classification privileges accumulated wealth, English-language circulation, reputation, and corporate ties, placing teaching, community engagement, and regional educational needs in a secondary position. Teacher preparation therefore supplies a historical criterion for distinguishing market prestige from social quality.

Keywords: Academic autonomy; institutional assessment; professional formation; scientific labor; tertiary teaching.

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Universidades de classe mundial ou universidades socialmente necessárias? Rankings, licenciaturas e função pública no capitalismo dependente

Resumo

Sob a expansão dos sistemas classificatórios globais, a educação superior latino-americana passou a receber prescrições de qualidade construídas nos centros econômicos dominantes. O artigo examina a contradição entre a universidade de classe mundial e a universidade socialmente necessária, tomando as licenciaturas como índice de compromisso com a escola estatal e com a formação humana. Pergunta-se como os rankings convertem prestígio bibliométrico em comando institucional e quais consequências decorrem desse movimento para países de capitalismo dependente. Derivada de pesquisas recentes desenvolvidas em grupo dedicado à Economia Política da Educação e à formação humana, a investigação assume caráter crítico e teórico-documental, com revisão de produções brasileiras e latino-americanas sobre classificações acadêmicas, autonomia, formação docente, extrema direita, precarização científica e fuga de cérebros. A análise, orientada pelo materialismo histórico-dialético, articula dados comparativos de 2013 a 2022, pesquisas sobre cursos formadores e registros do trabalho científico. Os resultados indicam que a classificação mundial privilegia riqueza acumulada, circulação em inglês, reputação e vínculos empresariais, deixando em plano inferior a docência, a extensão e as necessidades educacionais regionais. Conclui-se que as licenciaturas oferecem um critério histórico para distinguir prestígio mercantil de qualidade social.

Palavras-chave: Autonomia acadêmica; avaliação institucional; Educação Superior; formação docente; trabalho científico.



¿Universidades de clase mundial o universidades socialmente necesarias? Clasificaciones, preparación pedagógica y finalidad pública en el capitalismo dependiente

Resumen

Bajo la expansión de los sistemas globales de clasificación, la enseñanza superior latinoamericana ha recibido prescripciones de calidad producidas en los centros económicos dominantes. El artículo examina la contradicción entre la universidad de clase mundial y la institución socialmente necesaria, tomando la preparación pedagógica como índice de compromiso con la escuela estatal y con la formación humana. Se pregunta cómo las clasificaciones convierten el prestigio bibliométrico en mando institucional y qué consecuencias derivan de ese movimiento para países de capitalismo dependiente. Derivada de investigaciones recientes desarrolladas en el Grupo de Investigación en Economía Política de la Educación, la investigación adopta un carácter crítico, teórico y documental, mediante una revisión de producciones brasileñas y latinoamericanas sobre evaluación académica, autonomía, preparación profesional, extrema derecha, precariedad científica y fuga de cerebros. Orientado por el materialismo histórico-dialéctico, el análisis articula datos comparativos de 2013 a 2022, investigaciones sobre cursos formadores y registros del trabajo científico. Los resultados indican que la clasificación global privilegia riqueza acumulada, circulación en inglés, reputación y vínculos empresariales, relegando la docencia, la extensión y las necesidades educativas regionales. La preparación pedagógica ofrece, por ello, un criterio histórico para distinguir prestigio mercantil de calidad social.

Palabras clave: Autonomía académica; Enseñanza Superior; evaluación institucional; formación profesional; trabajo científico.



Introduction

In the first decades of the 21st century, under financial globalization and the private concentration of science, the Latin American university came to be judged by a classificatory grammar produced outside the historical conditions that gave rise to it. In annual tables, ordinal positions condense unequal institutions, countries with disparate fiscal capacities, and scientific systems formed by long-standing asymmetries. The promise of universal comparison converts historical differences into numerical distances. Through this mechanism, the world-class university (WCU) presents itself as a common destiny, even though the material means of access to this status remain concentrated in the dominant cores of the world economy.

In Latin America, the importation of this ideal carries its own content. Under dependent capitalism, university modernization occurred through subordinate association with centers of accumulation, multilateral agencies, and English-language editorial circuits. Dependency, in this framework, does not correspond to a passing lag that would be overcome by imitating the richest institutions; it designates a historical form of subordinate integration in which internal expansion combines islands of excellence, persistent social inequality, scientific heteronomy, and the continuous transfer of intellectual resources to central economies. In late capitalism, the university is tasked with producing marketable knowledge, training an adaptable labor force, and demonstrating efficiency through indicators that obscure the distribution of wealth that sustains them.

Faced with this classificatory order, two questions guide the investigation. What university project is constituted when global positions begin to orient prestige, funding, planning, and institutional identity? What place is reserved for teacher education programs, state schools, and teaching staff when the dominant measure of quality privileges citations, international reputation, awards, patents, and corporate revenues? Between one question and the other



lies the central contradiction of this article: the university celebrated by rankings can increase its external visibility while simultaneously reducing the centrality of commitments linked to the educational needs of its population.

The WCU is centered on a concentration of prestigious researchers, high financial availability, indexed production, selective internationalization, corporate presence, and the capacity to compete for students, faculty, and resources. Thiengo, Bianchetti, and De Mari (2018) demonstrate that this model is directly linked to the Academic Ranking of World Universities and the Times Higher Education², whose indicators privilege awards, articles in international databases, citations, reputation, and fundraising. On the Latin American and Caribbean level, Thiengo, Almeida, and Bianchetti (2019) identified the role of international organizations in diffusing this prescription to countries that do not integrate the economic core of capital.

By socially necessary university, it is understood an institution whose quality is measured by its capacity to produce knowledge, educate professionals, sustain the state school, preserve intellectual autonomy, and respond to the historical needs of the working classes. This formulation does not reduce the university to immediate assistance, nor does it subordinate research to short-term utilitarian demands. In a different direction, it requires highly sophisticated science linked to public problems, rigorous theoretical training, extension associated with research, and teaching founded on the critical appropriation of accumulated knowledge. The public function, therefore, is not a lateral sector of the institution. It constitutes the principle through which teaching, research, and extension receive social unity.

At this point, teacher education programs acquire analytical value. In universities pressured to compete for positions, courses intended for teacher training reveal the effective hierarchy between scientific prestige and educational commitment. Low funding, curricular fragmentation, private distance education expansion, lower academic recognition, and fragile ties among teacher educators are not isolated problems of teacher training. They



express the place granted to basic education in the university project. When the university seeks global distinction and relegates teacher training courses, a split becomes visible between institutional reputation and the needs of the social majority.

Under the ultraliberal offensive and the rise of the far right, this split received new gravity. Budget cuts, attacks on autonomy, anti-scientism, and the conversion of the right to education into a service found support in societies marked by unemployment, underemployment, intermittent workdays, and social vulnerability. The political economy of insecurity converts material suffering into resentment against public institutions. In Brazil, Leher (2019; 2021) examined how austerity, cultural war, and corporate refunctionalization combined in the offensive against federal universities. On a regional scale, the problem refers to the ways in which bourgeois autocracy reappears in times of crisis, associating fiscal discipline, privatization, and hostility toward scientific culture.

Within the scope of recent research developed in a group dedicated to the Political Economy of Education and human development, this critical study examines the antagonism between the world-class university and the socially necessary university in dependent capitalism. Under the long duration of Latin American dependency, the public university was called upon to fulfill a dual requirement: to respond to the historical needs of peoples marked by the unequal appropriation of wealth and, simultaneously, to submit to transnational criteria produced in the centers that concentrate capital, science, and prestige. In this split, rankings convert historical differences into apparently universal scales, making ordinal position a measure of institutional value and transferring parameters compatible with universities provided with large funds, dominant editorial networks, and accumulated infrastructure to peripheral countries.

Based on this problem, the study aims to analyze rankings as a form of command, teacher education programs as an expression of the public function, and the precariousness of scientific work as a consequence of university



subordination. The hypothesis holds that this classificatory rationality induces, in dependent formations, a regressive selectivity: resources and prestige are concentrated in activities measurable by international metrics, whereas teacher training, extension, and social and regional needs are downgraded. In Latin America, this movement deepens the split between universities oriented toward global competition and universities required by public schools, the expanded reproduction of social life, and scientific sovereignty.

Methodological procedures and documentary composition

On the methodological level, the research is qualitative, theoretical-documentary, and comparative in nature. The documentary review mobilizes Brazilian and Latin American productions published between 2003 and 2023, selected for their direct relationship with four axes: academic rankings and the world-class university; autonomy and public function; teacher education programs and teacher training; scientific work, the far right, and brain drain. The selection combined Brazilian, Mexican, Chilean, and Venezuelan studies, as well as analyses of regional scope, so as to prevent the Brazilian experience from being taken as a sufficient representation of Latin America.

Under the orientation of historical-dialectical materialism, the documents were read as expressions of determined social relations. Instead of separating indicator, policy, and institution, the analysis sought to relate the composition of metrics to funding conditions, the international division of scientific labor, and the reproduction needs of the labor force. Contradiction, mediation, historicity, and totality organized the interpretation. Through this procedure, rankings were examined simultaneously as classification techniques, informational commodities, forms of governance, and condensations of inequality between national systems.

In empirical terms, data were selected to enable three comparisons. The first confronts Latin American participation among all ranked institutions with its presence in the top one hundred positions. The second relates the expansion



of teacher education programs, distance learning modalities, and public-private distribution. The third aligns budgetary contraction, the departure of qualified professionals, and the precarization of scientific work. Figures are used as expressions of historical relations, without converting them into self-sufficient proof.

Finally, we preserve the distinction between analytical agreement and documentary use. Studies that attribute managerial capacity or strategic utility to rankings were incorporated to understand the legitimacy of these instruments, without adhering to the conception of quality that sustains them. King-Domínguez, Llinàs-Audet, and Améstica-Rivas (2018), for example, identify four dimensions in the regional classification of the QS World University Rankings and treat their results as useful information for planning. Ganga-Contreras et al. (2022), drawing from 189 participants across 33 institutions in Chile and Venezuela, record the perception that internationalization, infrastructure, and territoriality influence institutional performance. These conclusions are relevant precisely because they show how classification enters everyday administration and comes to be recognized as a legitimate language of decision-making.

From the world-class university to academic rankometrics

Since 2003, with the creation of the Shanghai ranking, world classification ceased to be an editorial curiosity and began to participate in the direction of higher education systems. Between 2006 and 2022, according to Lloyd and Quintero López (2023), the number of international rankings grew from seven to sixty-three. This quantitative expansion was accompanied by thematic, regional, and disciplinary differentiation. Each new list expanded the market of comparison and offered institutions another avenue to demonstrate position, reputation, and value.

Within this expansion, the world-class university consolidated itself as a normative figure. Thiengo, Bianchetti, and De Mari (2018) show the correspondence between its attributes and the indicators of the ARWU and



the THE. Concentration of talent, Nobel prizes, Fields medals, publications in Nature and Science, citations, corporate revenue, internationalization, and flexible management make up the portrait of the desired institution. In this composition, teaching and research appear subordinated to criteria of visibility and yield; quality ceases to refer to the university's relationship with its society and comes to be inferred from its position relative to global competitors.

Through this academic rankometrics, the number stops describing and starts commanding. Strategic plans incorporate goals for upward mobility; rectorates establish offices of classificatory intelligence; national policies select a few institutions to receive concentrated resources; researchers adapt publishing practices to the databases used by evaluators. Hazelkorn (2011) formulated the political choice that remains open: to fund a few world-class universities or to build a high-quality system for the entire population. In dependent formations, concentrating resources in a few institutions means withdrawing means from networks that still need to expand access, retention, teacher training, and regional research.

Under the appearance of neutrality, rankings reduce heterogeneous functions to a single value. Ordorika's (2015) critique exposes the core of this procedure:

Through normalization and the weighted sum of a few selected indicators, the evaluation of higher education institutions is reduced to a single number. In the choice of indicators and information sources, in the methodologies employed in their construction, and in the weighting assigned to each of them, limitations and biases that are not made explicit in the presentation of results remain hidden. Almost all international rankings focus on measuring indicators associated with the international circulation of scientific production, such as Nobel prizes, articles published in journals indexed in Web of Science or Scopus, highly cited researchers, articles in the journals Nature and Science, and the average number of citations per article. Student training activities, university extension, cultural diffusion, and compliance with social responsibilities and commitments—substantive functions of universities—are practically absent from the rankings (Ordorika, 2015, p. 8, our translation).



In the composition of bibliometric databases, linguistic inequality adds another layer. Ordorika's (2015) research recorded that nearly 1.2 million of the 10.5 million full-time higher education faculty members worldwide belonged to Spanish-speaking countries. The Ulrich's directory³ listed 9,376 academic journals in Spanish, but only 720 appeared in Scopus and 263 in Web of Science. In the United States, out of 5,606 journals, 4,125 were present in these indices. The difference does not derive from individual scientific merit; it stems from editorial architecture, dominant language, indexing costs, and the historical centrality of certain countries.

It is at this point that 'metricoloniaity' becomes visible. Metrics produced by corporations and academic centers of the Global North convert an unequal editorial geography into a universal hierarchy of quality. Circulation in English receives higher value; regional journals become peripheral; topics of local interest obtain lower citation capacity; fields with distinct publication standards are compared by common measures. Metric coloniality does not require explicit prohibition; it is enough for the system to repeatedly reward the same forms of publication and make adherence to them a condition of recognition.

In reputation surveys, inequality precedes the response. Villaseñor Becerra, Moreno Arellano, and Flores Orozco (2015) record that, in the 2008 THE, questionnaires presented only three Mexican universities to evaluators, compared to 130 institutions from the United States. Reputation, thus, measures previously distributed recognition. Well-known universities become even better known, and the annual ranking confirms the memory produced by previous years themselves. Institutional brand and academic quality merge into the same score.

At the regional level, specific rankings seek to correct the low Latin American presence. However, Lloyd and Quintero López (2023) show that THE and QS rankings alter weightings between their world and regional versions. In 2022, THE assigned 30% to citations in the world ranking and 20% in the Latin American ranking; QS assigned 40% to academic reputation in the world



ranking and 30% in the regional one, increasing employer reputation from 10% to 20%. If quality were an absolute property captured by the instrument, weighting shifts should not alter position so drastically. The variation confirms that the ranking produces the object it claims to measure.

In data from 2013 to 2022, regional asymmetry assumes numerical form. Lloyd and Quintero López (2023) identified 239 universities from nineteen Latin American countries, ranked 1,989 times. The region accounted for 9.3% of the institutions present on the lists, but obtained only 1% of the positions among the top one hundred. Only the Universidad de Buenos Aires and the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México reached this group in eight instances. Among the top two hundred, no regional institution appeared in the top fifty positions. The Universidade de São Paulo (USP), the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, and UNAM concentrated their presence between 101st and 150th places.

Over the decade, the number of regional institutions evaluated grew from 83, in twelve countries, to 231, in nineteen countries—a 178% increase (Lloyd; Quintero López, 2023). However, the expansion of coverage did not eliminate concentration. Brazil and Mexico accounted for 50.2% of regional participation. Brazil accumulated 71 institutions and 709 rankings; Mexico, 36 and 290; Chile, 26 and 289. More universities were incorporated into the race, without an equivalent change at the top. The opening of the registry expanded the base of the classificatory pyramid.

In view of these numbers, the low Latin American position cannot be explained by isolated administrative deficiency; scientific research requires continuous funding, laboratories, libraries, graduate networks, stable careers, and editorial systems. Lloyd and Quintero López (2023) observe that these rankings express institutional wealth and national funding structures. Comparing a university dependent on a sparse public budget with another endowed with multi-billion endowment funds converts an inequality of means into a difference of merit.



In this regime, there is a “rankocracy” (cf. Diver, 2022)⁴ that produces two simultaneous effects. Externally, it reaffirms the supremacy of central institutions. Internally, it encourages Latin American governments to concentrate resources on a few universities capable of competing. The first effect legitimizes the global hierarchy; the second deepens national differentiation. Degree programs lacking high bibliometric returns, regional campuses, popular extension programs, and teacher education programs come to compete for resources under unfavorable conditions. The world ranking, therefore, does not remain outside the university; it reorganizes internal priorities and distributes value among fields, individuals, and purposes.

Dependent capitalism, late capitalism, and the capture of the public function

In Latin American historical formation, the university was born linked to the constitution of political power, the formation of elites, and the elaboration of state legitimacies. Acosta Silva (2019) discussed that autonomy, institutional power, and social representation were constructed over the long duration. Autonomy does not stem from isolation, but from the public recognition of an institution endowed with its own rules, intellectual authority, and the capacity to intervene in collective life. When this autonomy is reduced to the financial freedom to seek revenue, the political dimension that gave rise to it is lost.

In the Brazilian case, Chauí (2003) distinguished the university as a social institution from the university managed as an organization. The former finds its reference in society, in law, in legitimacy, and in autonomy; the latter is oriented toward private objectives, control of means, productivity, and administrative success. Under the State Reform of the 1990s, education, health, and culture were shifted to the service sector that could receive private management. This semantic shift corresponded to a material shift: rights came to be evaluated by cost, and public institutions received corporate criteria.



In dependent capitalism, the conversion of the university into a service organization has a precise purpose. Local bourgeois fractions, associated with financial capital and transnational corporations, demand the formation of a labor force, applied research, and a reduction in public expenditure, but keep the core centers of technological decision-making in central countries. Leher (2021) recalls that co-authorship between Brazilian universities and companies showed a proportion similar to that observed in the European Union, around 2.5%, which weakens the argument that the Brazilian university is averse to relationships with the productive sector. The problem resides in the dependent form of this relationship and in low corporate willingness to fund long-term research.

Under financial globalization, the public function of the university is subjected to a dual expropriation: on the one hand, austerity compresses the budget, civil service examinations, and infrastructure; on the other hand, corporate rhetoric presents private fundraising as an inevitable way out of the scarcity that fiscal policy itself produces, converting state-fabricated scarcity into a pretext for expanding the presence of capital within the institution (Chesnais, 1996). The insufficiency created by fiscal policy converts into a justification to deepen privatization. In this circuit, the university is compelled to seek revenues at the exact moment its conditions to define, with autonomy, scientific problems worthy of investigation are weakened.

During the Bolsonaro government, the autocratic form of this process became explicit. Leher (2021) examined *Future-se*, attempts at intervention in the selection of rectors, the cultural war, and the attack on the indivisibility of teaching, research, and extension. On the economic plane, the proposal associated autonomy with self-generation of revenues, entrepreneurship, and massive lower-cost training. On the ideological plane, universities were presented as enemies of order, places of waste, and centers of indoctrination. The far right articulated ultraliberal discipline with hostility toward science.



In societies marked by unemployment, underemployment, and loss of rights, this discourse finds a contradictory social base. The daily experience of precariousness is diverted from its economic causes and directed against civil servants, students, researchers, and institutions. The university, by concentrating specialized knowledge and public resources, becomes a convenient target. Propaganda offers a simplified explanation: if life worsens, the problem lies in the rights of protected groups, not in the private appropriation of wealth. For Leher (2019), the rise of the Brazilian far right stems from austerity, the loss of strength of popular organizations, and the actions of transnational ideological centers.

On the continental level, this current combines with distinct national histories, yet finds common conditions: public debt, deindustrialization, informality, technological dependence, and media concentration. Anti-scientism is not external to political economy; it reduces the public capacity to question private interests, delegitimizes research on inequality, and opens space for decisions guided by corporations. When the university loses public authority, the possibility of subordinating it to contracts, metrics, and platforms expands.

Under this capture, uberization appears as the social pedagogy of late capitalism. Leher (2021) describes the association between self-entrepreneurship, *pejotização* [corporate-entity contracting], and work without rights. The university is tasked with training individuals capable of continuously selling their labor force, assuming private risks, and interpreting insecurity as freedom. Formative content shifts from the critical understanding of society to individual adaptation to unstable markets. Human development gives way to training for competitive survival.

In Dias Sobrinho's (2018) formulation, the university's public duty requires another measure of quality:

First observation, obvious, but necessary: the social responsibility of the University is not the same thing as the responsibility of society in relation to the University. The latter assumes, without declaring, that the



University (by extension, education) is a public asset to be maintained and developed by all. Every principle has duty as its counterpart. The principle is: education (therefore, the University) is a public, essential, and irreplaceable good, a common heritage, a right of all. The duty is: society (and, obviously, the State) is responsible for the maintenance, functioning, supervision, and democratization of this public heritage, always with the highest possible quality. Technical and, unavoidably, social quality. University quality must be for all and for the benefit of all (Dias Sobrinho, 2018, p. 586).

Dagnino's (2015) critique adds another element: the peripheral opposition between quality and relevance. When the research agenda imitates topics valued abroad, the university can obtain peer recognition without responding to national problems. When it approaches popular groups without theoretical density, it can reduce its contribution to immediate actions. The necessary university requires overcoming this split through advanced research linked to social needs, integrated extension, and teaching capable of forming subjects who understand the determinations of their own existence.

In dependent capitalism, therefore, the public function cannot be defined by a sum of activities; it requires autonomy from capital, stable state funding, commitment to the public school, scientific production oriented by regional problems, and democratization of access. Without these elements, a rise in rankings can coexist with institutional disintegration. The university improves its external position and impoverishes its internal relationship with the society that funds it.

Teacher education programs: the social measure of the university

Among the activities poorly valued by global rankings, teacher education offers the most concrete measure of university responsibility toward the cultural reproduction of society. Teacher education programs link higher education to daycare centers, schools, municipal and state networks, rural communities, urban peripheries, Indigenous education, special education, and youth and



adult education. Through them, university knowledge enters common schooling and reaches generations that may never directly access a campus.

Despite this social centrality, Brazilian history has assigned less prestige to teacher education programs. Gatti (2010) reconstructs the persistence of the model in which disciplinary training occupies the center and pedagogical preparation receives limited space. The separation between the bachelor's degree [bacharelado] and the teacher education degree [licenciatura] is not merely a curricular division; it distributes academic value: research and specific subject content receive a superior status, whereas teaching, school, and educational practice are treated as professional add-ons.

In the passage below, the author condenses the institutional fragmentation that accompanies this hierarchy:

In any case, what is observed is that teacher training for basic education is carried out, across all types of teacher education programs, in a fragmented manner between disciplinary areas and levels of schooling, with Brazil lacking, in higher education institutions, a dedicated faculty or institute for training these professionals with a common formative base, as observed in other countries where teacher training centers encompass all specialties with studies, research, and extension related to didactic activity and the reflections and theories associated with it. Let us also remember that, historically, in teacher-training courses there has always been a formative separation between the polyvalent teacher—early childhood education and early years of elementary school—and the specialist subject teacher, just as for the latter, confinement and dependence on disciplinary bachelor's degrees became established (Gatti, 2010, p. 1358).

Under this fragmentation, teacher training loses unity. Curricula combine courses without a common project; departments preserve their own jurisdictions; practicums appear at the end of the program; the basic school figures as a place of application rather than a space for producing scientific questions. The socially necessary university requires the opposite movement: the educational problem must integrate historical foundations, specific subject



content, didactics, public policies, and knowledge of school reality right from the start of the formative path.

In the data compiled by Gatti et al. (2019), recent expansion deepened private presence and distance education. In the Degree in Pedagogy [Licenciatura em Pedagogia], for every 23 private enrollments in distance learning mode, there were fewer than two public enrollments. Even among face-to-face courses, private enrollments were nearly double state enrollments. Offerings grew, but growth occurred under large-scale corporate models, tutoring, and a strong separation between the training institution and the school.

In the training of teachers for specific subject areas, the distribution presents differences, but the bachelor-centric culture remains. Gatti et al. (2019) note that teacher education programs remain organized around isolated subjects, despite basic education demanding articulation across fields. The authors also indicate inequality in the conditions of teacher educators: private institutions concentrate part-time and hourly contracts; public institutions offer a higher presence of full-time or exclusive dedication. The contractual form directly interferes with the possibility of mentoring students, coordinating practicums, conducting educational research, and building collective projects.

For this reason, the place of teacher education programs cannot be evaluated solely by the number of slots. Quantitative expansion can coexist with formative impoverishment. Low-cost courses, large class sizes, and fragmented faculty labor meet the corporate need to reduce costs, but fail to address the complexity of basic education. Pedagogical knowledge demands continued study, institutional coexistence, research, supervision, and a stable relationship with schools. Distance learning can integrate public policies under specific conditions; converted into the dominant pathway of commodification, it separates future teachers from the experiences they ought to comprehend.

Within the world-class university, this activity finds low correspondence with core indicators. Ordorika (2015) observes that student training,



extension, and social commitments almost disappear from rankings. Thiengo, Bianchetti, and De Mari (2018) show that citations, reputation, revenues, and internationalization receive high weights. The institutional consequence is predictable: areas capable of generating highly cited articles and corporate contracts acquire greater strength in budgetary competition. Teacher education programs, whose value is realized in the quality of schools over decades, offer a low and diffuse rankometric return.

When examining Latin American rankings as a measure of quality, King-Domínguez, Llinàs-Audet, and Améstica-Rivas (2018) identified reputation, research, internationalization, and resources as dimensions of institutional segmentation. The study shows that regional classifications can order universities with relative similarity. However, agreement among lists does not resolve the issue of the criterion; diverse instruments can agree because they share the same conception of quality, and not because they capture the public contribution of institutions.

In Chile and Venezuela, Ganga-Contreras et al. (2022) found few general differences in the perception of consulted experts, with emphasis given to internationalization, infrastructure, and territoriality. Territoriality deserves attention; a university linked to a sparsely industrialized region with a strong rural or Indigenous presence receives tasks that do not convert easily into global citations. Its teacher education programs may constitute the main pathway for providing teachers. Measuring this institution by the same criteria applied to an urban research-intensive university produces a formal and socially unequal comparison.

Therefore, teacher education programs function as a historical litmus test of the university. Where they receive funding, faculty career paths, research, and integration with schools, a commitment to the universalization of knowledge exists. Where they are treated as low-cost courses, the public function is reduced. The issue is not about opposing teacher training to high-level research; it consists of asking why an institution considered excellent would



accept training precariously the professionals responsible for the education of the majority.

In a socially necessary university, teacher education programs should occupy a strategic position. This implies interdisciplinary training centers, an organic presence of public school networks, practicums from the earliest terms, research linked to school problems, broad cultural training, and a dignified career path for teacher educators. It also implies recognizing that the state school is one of the primary institutions for the socialization of scientific knowledge. Without well-trained teachers, university science remains concentrated, and democracy loses material substance.

Under dependent capitalism, this commitment acquires a continental meaning. Countries that import technology, suffer fiscal constraints, and coexist with inequality need public systems capable of training teachers across their territories. The pursuit of a few world-class institutions does not meet this need; a socially necessary system must elevate general conditions without abandoning advanced research centers. The excellence of a few does not compensate for the precariousness of many.

Precarization of scientific labor, “doctoruberization,” and brain drain

Alongside teacher education programs, the fate of young doctoral holders exposes another expression of the subordinate university. Graduate education expanded scientific training, but the creation of stable positions remained far behind this growth. Between earning a degree and securing professional integration, a prolonged wait has set in, marked by temporary labor relations that dissolve the continuity of academic life. The institution trains researchers on an increasing scale, but returns to each individual the responsibility for surviving in a narrow market, where unemployment appears as a personal failure rather than the product of a structure that produces qualification without guaranteeing work.



“Doctoruberization” names this debasement of scientific labor. Its core lies not in digital platforms, but in the conversion of intellectual activity into fragmented service provision, lacking a career structure, stability, or socially protected time for research. The doctorate loses its status as an entry point into a lasting scientific community and functions instead as a credential subjected to competition for discontinuous occupations. In this way, researchers are compelled to sell portions of their training according to immediate demand, converting years of study into scattered work and academic autonomy into permanent availability.

Under late capitalism, prolonged education coexists with wage suppression. The same system that demands international publications, language proficiency, mobility, and technical expertise reduces civil service examinations [concurso] and laboratory positions. This contradiction fosters brain drain. Core countries receive workers whose training was funded by public resources from dependent countries. Academic mobility, which could foster symmetrical cooperation, turns into a unilateral transfer of skilled labor.

Fargoni (2023) links this movement to the retraction of Brazilian scientific funding. Based on data series from the MCTI and Ipea, the study notes that the ministry’s budget in 2021 was 78.25% lower than in 2008. Between 2019 and 2021, approximately R\$ 12.716 billion from the National Fund for Scientific and Technological Development (FNDCT) remained impounded. This cut does not merely represent an accounting reduction; it interrupts research, dissolves teams, postpones civil service examinations, and compels researchers to seek other countries or different professions.

The migration data cited by the study reinforce this relationship. In 2020, approximately 3,300 highly qualified professionals applied for preferential visas to the United States, representing a growth of nearly 11% compared to the previous year. Definitive exit declarations of Brazilians rose from 8,170 in 2011 to 23,271 in 2018; in 2019, there were 22,549 records (Fargoni, 2023). Not every



departure corresponds to a researcher, but the trend offers an indicator of the material environment in which scientific brain drain develops.

Under rankocracy, brain drain receives an ambiguous reading. The departure of researchers may increase international co-authorships and citation networks, benefiting institutional indicators. For the national system, however, it signifies a loss of scientific capacity, student advisement, and laboratory continuity. Metrics count the co-authored article; society bears the absence of the professional; the very same process can improve a number while weakening an institution.

Under the far right, the problem acquires a political component. Public attacks on universities, the disqualification of researchers, and denialism produce a hostile environment for remaining. For Leher (2019, 2021), the culture war is not reduced to electoral rhetoric; it provides the foundation for budget cuts, interventions, and privatization. By presenting science as a privilege or a fraud, political power lowers the symbolic cost of abandoning laboratories and academic careers.

To break this circuit, a socially necessary university policy must align advanced training, scientific career paths, and state funding in the same public direction. When graduate expansion is decoupled from the creation of lasting positions, the system produces degrees without institutional destinations and transfers the burden of a politically produced deficiency to the researcher. When internationalization is demanded without the material conditions for return, academic mobility becomes a pathway for permanent brain drain. Under the same principle, opening teacher education programs without stable faculty downgrades teacher preparation to an administrative device. A long-term policy—capable of distributing scientific opportunities across regions and linking training, labor, and institutional retention—corresponds to the university's public function.

From this perspective, brain drain does not constitute a moral failure of those who leave, but an individual response to objective working conditions. In



the critique of political economy, Marx (2013) demonstrated that labor power, although socially formed, enters capitalist relations as a capacity subjected to private appropriation. In dependent societies, this contradiction reaches scientific production: public resources fund long training processes, yet the university structure discards the researcher precisely at the highest level of qualification. Lacking material conditions to stay, scientists transfer their intellectual labor power to core systems, which receive a scientific capacity whose social cost was borne by the periphery. Individual departure thus completes an international circuit of skilled labor transfer and deepens the dependency that the university ought to combat.

The socially necessary university as a historical project

Faced with the limits of the world-class university, the alternative does not consist in accepting low quality or international isolation. A socially necessary university must produce rigorous science, participate in global networks, and train researchers, yet it subordinates these means to public ends. The difference lies not in the absence of advanced research, but in the social direction of university policy. External prestige may be a consequence; it must not command the institution.

Starting from the transition proposed by Hazelkorn (2011) from world-class universities to world-class systems, Latin American reality demands another criterion: socially necessary systems capable of articulating advanced research, teacher education, and democratization without concentrating resources in a few metropolitan institutions. In this direction, autonomy as analyzed by Acosta Silva (2019) acquires political substance when the university is recognized as a collective right, for its public strength derives from its concrete presence in social life through education, research, and extension oriented toward the population's historical needs.

In the scientific sphere, Dagnino (2015) shifts the university agenda from imitating core institutions to addressing historically produced social



needs, without reducing research to immediate utilities. Problems tied to the reproduction of collective life require high theoretical and technical elaboration; therefore, social engagement redefines the objects and purposes of science. In this same movement, teacher education programs [licenciaturas] must abandon their subordinate position. Gatti (2010) and Gatti et al. (2019) advocate for curricular integration, valuation of teacher educators, and a continuous relationship with public schools, because training teachers means ensuring the social circulation of knowledge and tackling the reproduction of educational inequality.

In the sphere of labor, the socially necessary university must break with doctoruberization through stable career paths, public funding, and material conditions for institutional retention. Fargoni (2023) demonstrates that academic mobility, lacking an internal institutional base, converts cooperation into brain drain. Thus, internationalization fulfills a public function only when it expands national and regional capacities, retains researchers, and subordinates international circulation to collective needs, rather than facilitating the appropriation of skilled labor by central nations.

At the level of evaluation, metricolony must be countered by public, multidimensional, and contextualized indicators. Bibliographic output, citations, and international cooperation can be included in the analysis, but must coexist with student education, contributions to state schools, extension, inequality reduction, regional presence, working conditions, and publications in local languages. No single index can capture the quality of a university. Evaluation should produce understanding and public guidance, not a list of winners.

In this sense, regional rankings do not resolve the problem when they merely alter weighting factors. Lloyd and Quintero López (2023) demonstrated that positioning varies according to the methodology used. A Latin American evaluation must stem from the history and needs of the region, rather than a secondary adaptation of the global model. The question should cease to be which institution comes closest to Harvard or Oxford. It must ask which



institution expands the collective capacity to understand and transform its society.

In the end, the opposition between the two projects can be summarized by their criteria. The world-class university seeks rank; the socially necessary university seeks the universalization of knowledge. The former concentrates resources to compete; the latter distributes capacities without abandoning advanced research. The former measures reputation; the latter accounts for education, science, democracy, and collective life. The former conforms to global hierarchy; the latter seeks to break the subordination that reproduces it.

Final considerations

Throughout the path developed here, the world-class university has proved inseparable from the rankings that give it visible shape. Awards, citations, reputation, internationalization, and corporate revenues constitute criteria suited to institutions endowed with accumulated wealth, central scientific systems, and privileged editorial circulation. Applied as a universal measure, they convert historical inequality into academic hierarchy and present the concentration of resources as institutional merit.

In Latin America, data from 2013 to 2022 confirm this asymmetry. The region accounted for 9.3% of classified institutions and only 1% of positions among the top hundred. The expansion of the number of participants did not alter the top distribution. More universities entered the lists, but the summit remained concentrated. Rankocracy expanded competition without democratizing its outcomes.

In response to the first question, it is concluded that rankometric adoption produces a selective university project. Measurable activities receive prestige, planning, and resources; public functions with slow or diffuse returns remain secondary. Metricolony leads dependent institutions to reorganize priorities according to external parameters and to compare themselves with universities sustained by incomparable material conditions.



In response to the second question, teacher education programs [licenciaturas] reveal the social cost of this project. Curricular fragmentation, a bachelor-centric culture, private distance-learning growth, and fragile contracts for teacher educators indicate that teacher preparation still occupies an inferior position. A university incapable of offering consistent education to state school teachers may obtain international visibility, but it does not achieve social quality.

In the sphere of scientific labor, “doctoruberization” and brain drain complete the picture. The training of researchers grows under a reduction of civil service examinations, outdated fellowships, and budgetary cuts. Dependent countries fund long educational paths only to lose professionals to core systems or to occupations unrelated to their qualifications.

Under the rise of the far right, austerity and anti-scientism compose a single offensive against the public university. Symbolic delegitimation prepares the withdrawal of resources; the withdrawal of resources reduces its social presence and offers a new pretext for the campaign accusing it of uselessness. Breaking this circuit depends on the material recomposition of the institution and its permanent reconnection with popular needs, for autonomy without a public base becomes an empty legal formula.

For this reason, the socially necessary university cannot be defined as a fixed model, but as a historical guiding principle. Its quality is measured by its capacity to convert knowledge into a social right and to articulate, within a single totality, teacher education, research, and extension. When these dimensions are separated, the public function dissolves; when they are realized as a unity, the university ceases to respond to the metrics of prestige and begins to respond to the demands of collective life.

Ultimately, the choice is not reduced to being inside or outside of rankings. The issue resides in deciding who defines quality and in the service of which needs it will be constructed. For dependent societies, rising in rankings without altering the international division of knowledge means managing their



own subordination. Building socially necessary universities means converting science and education into a collective force for emancipation.

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Notes

- 1 Statement on the Use of Artificial Intelligence – Gemini, an artificial intelligence tool developed by Google, was used to assist in translating this article into English. The translated version was fully reviewed and adjusted by the editorial team to ensure fidelity to the original text, terminological accuracy, and compliance with the journal’s editorial standards. The tool was not used to generate the article’s arguments, analyses, or academic content.
- 2 ARWU is the acronym for Academic Ranking of World Universities, a classification created by Shanghai Jiao Tong University, centered on scientific output, citations, and academic awards. THE corresponds to Times Higher Education World University Rankings, which evaluates teaching, research, citations, international outlook, and institutional income. QS designates QS World University Rankings, produced by the British company Quacquarelli Symonds, with indicators of academic reputation, employability, citations, faculty-student ratio, and internationalization.
- 3 The Ulrich’s directory is a global directory that gathers data on journals. Scopus and Web of Science are the largest databases that analyze citations, index highly relevant scientific journals, and measure the output of global researchers.
- 4 The term dialogues with the English word rankocracy, used by Colin Diver (2022) to designate the power acquired by the ranking industry over higher education. In this article, “rankocracy” [ranqueocracia] receives a conceptual elaboration linked to Latin American university conditions.





How to cite

FARGONI, E. H. E. Universidades de classe mundial ou universidades socialmente necessárias? Rankings, licenciaturas e função pública no capitalismo dependente. **Educação em Análise**, Londrina, v. 11, p. 1-29, 2026. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5433/1984-7939.2026.v11.55781>.

Submitted: July 22, 2026

Accepted: August 17, 2026

Published: September 23, 2026

CRediT

Acknowledgments	Not applicable
Funding	Not applicable
Conflict of Interest	The author certifies thathe has no commercial or associative interests that represent a conflict of interest concerning this manuscript.
Ethical Approval	Not applicable
Author Contributions	FARGONI, E. H. E. declares having performed conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, writing, supervision, validation, visualization, review, and editing.

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