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GLOBAL ACADEMIC RANKINGS AND INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH OFFICES: A STUDY IN BRAZILIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

Rankings acadêmicos internacionais e escritórios de pesquisa institucional: um estudo em universidades públicas brasileiras

Rankings académicos internacionales y oficinas de investigación institucionales: un estudio en universidades públicas brasileñas

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Abstract: The rise in academic rankings has created a growing demand for performance data in Brazilian public universities. In response, some institutions have established research offices, emulating typical American higher education structures and procedures. This study investigates the impact of academic rankings on the institutional research offices of three Brazilian universities, utilizing qualitative methods such as interviews with academic leaders and analysis of official documents. Findings reveal that while rankings played a pivotal role in establishing these offices, their dominant influence may constrain the strategic functions of institutional research within university administration.

Keywords: higher education; academic rankings; institutional research.

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Resumo: *Rankings* acadêmicos têm criado uma demanda significativa de dados de desempenho acadêmico para as universidades públicas brasileiras. Essa questão tem levado algumas universidades a lidar com a questão a partir da criação de escritórios de pesquisa institucional, replicando estrutura e procedimentos adotados na educação superior estadunidense. Este artigo tem como objetivo estudar a influência de *rankings* acadêmicos sobre esses escritórios em três universidades públicas brasileiras, por meio de pesquisa qualitativa realizada a partir da análise de dados obtidos com entrevistas de dirigentes universitários e documentos oficiais. Os resultados indicam que, embora os *rankings* acadêmicos tenham desempenhado um papel crucial na criação dos escritórios, a centralidade dessas classificações na pesquisa institucional pode eventualmente restringir a capacidade dos escritórios de desempenhar um papel mais estratégico na administração universitária.

Palavras-chave: educação superior; *rankings* acadêmicos; pesquisa institucional.

Resumen: Los *rankings* académicos han creado una demanda significativa de datos sobre desempeño académico en las universidades públicas brasileñas, lo que llevó a algunas universidades a crear oficinas de investigación institucional, reproduciendo estructuras y procedimientos de la educación superior estadounidense. Este texto tiene como objetivo investigar la influencia de los *rankings* académicos sobre esas oficinas en tres universidades públicas brasileñas, mediante una investigación cualitativa realizada por medio de análisis de entrevistas con dirigentes universitarios y de documentos oficiales. Los resultados sugieren que, aunque los *rankings* académicos hayan desempeñado un papel crucial en la creación de las oficinas, la centralidad de esas clasificaciones en la investigación institucional puede eventualmente restringir la capacidad de esas oficinas en desempeñar un rol más estratégico en la administración universitaria.

Palabras clave: educación superior; *rankings* académicos; investigación institucional.

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, international academic rankings have gained prominence across different spheres. From newspaper headlines to university board meetings, these rankings have increasingly been used as benchmarks for institutional excellence. In Brazil, universities frequently highlight their positions in global rankings in official publications (Barreyro; Santos; Ferreira, 2021). Moreover, policymakers and legislators often reference rankings in discussions on higher education, whether to praise institutions or to criticize them (Em evento ..., 2019; Martins; Barreyro, 2023; Senado Federal, 2015).

Beyond their rapid institutionalization, it is striking that these rankings often operate at the periphery of the higher education field. That is, they are external initiatives, developed outside universities and official regulatory bodies, and are typically produced by specialized agencies, newspapers, or magazines (Hazelkorn, 2011). Furthermore, academic rankings face strong criticism within the scientific community—either for their reductive approach or the limitations of their metrics, which often fail to align with their ambitious claims (Calderón; França, 2019; Independent Expert Group, 2023). By reducing academic excellence to a narrow set of indicators, rankings risk overlooking the diversity—and sometimes the ambiguity—of the university mission. While they are promoted as measures of institutional quality, these metrics frequently assess, indirectly, factors influenced by economic, geographical, and linguistic biases, rather than effectively capturing institutional excellence (Cabello; Imbroisi, 2019). For instance, citation-based metrics, a core component of most rankings, measure the impact rather than the quality of research (Aksnes; Langfeldt; Wouters, 2019). This impact, in turn, is affected by variables unrelated to research quality, such as journal circulation, number of co-authors, and article length (Walters, 2017).

Despite these shortcomings, academic rankings have driven significant changes in different higher education systems (Erkkilä; Piironen, 2020; Yudkevich; Altbach; Rumbley, 2016). Countries such as Russia, France, China, and Denmark have implemented reforms to improve their universities' ranking positions, including setting classification targets, encouraging institutional mergers, and adopting performance-based funding models (Salmi, 2023).

Not only policymakers but also university leaders have used rankings as a guiding tool for institutional strategies. One of the most notable developments associated with the rise of rankings has been the establishment of institutional research offices worldwide (Chirikov, 2013). Originally conceived in the United States, these offices are dedicated to collecting, producing, and analyzing strategic data for academic planning. While similar activities existed under different names in other countries, the formalization of these offices reflects a progressive shift in the rationales

shaping university governance, rather than a fundamental transformation of administrative structures.

To understand how this practice has emerged in Brazil, this study examines the creation of institutional research offices in three Brazilian public universities, analyzing the role rankings played in their development.

The article is organized into three sections, in addition to this introduction and the final considerations. The next section provides a brief historical overview of institutional research offices in the United States, discussing their main functions and recent trends. The following section outlines the methodology used to select and categorize the documents and interviews analyzed in this study. Finally, we present and discuss the findings, highlighting similarities and differences among the three universities. The conclusion reflects on how these patterns reveal broader aspects of the institutionalization of academic rankings in Brazilian higher education.

2 INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH: HISTORY AND CONCEPT

One of the expressions of globalization in higher education is the widespread adoption of university governance practices. In this context, institutional research has transcended its origins in the United States, spreading globally through the creation of professional associations and institutional offices dedicated to the field. Currently, there are at least eight institutional research associations outside the United States, covering various countries and/or regions: Australia, Canada, Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, the Philippines, Southeast Asia, Southern Africa, and Taiwan (Chirikov, 2013; Reichard, 2012). In addition to these associations, institutional research offices have been established at universities around the world, including Brazil, where such offices exist at the institutions subject to this study: the University of São Paulo (USP), the University of Campinas (Unicamp), and the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ).

There is a significant time gap between the emergence of early institutional research activities and their institutionalization and spread in the United States. While there is some variation in definitions, institutional research is generally understood to involve activities aimed at informing planning, policy-making, and decision-making in higher education institutions (Saupe, 1990; Volkwein; Liu; Woodell, 2012). Although such activities can be traced back to the 18th century, the institutionalization of institutional research did not occur until much later, in the mid-20th century, when the creation of the Association of Institutional Research (AIR) helped to solidify and formalize the field across the country.

At least three key phenomena help explain why institutional research spread from this period: massification, accountability pressures, and marketization. In terms of massification, Trow (1973) highlights that the dramatic expansion of enrollment

necessitated greater rationalization in the administration of higher education institutions, leading to the implementation of data collection and analysis systems to guide internal policies and decision-making. The establishment of institutional research offices is directly linked to the increasing complexity of university management.

The massification of higher education also redefined the relationships between the state, universities, and civil society (Chirikov, 2013). The growth in public investment in higher education was accompanied by demands for greater efficiency and transparency, which in turn prompted the development of data structures for reporting to government bodies (Reichard, 2012). One of the main functions of institutional research offices is to provide the necessary data and performance reports for accountability purposes (Volkwein; Liu; Woodell, 2012).

Finally, the subsequent reduction in public support and the rise in competition between higher education institutions in the 1980s in the United States led universities to explore alternative revenue sources. The increasing focus on business practices, which came to represent the financial and reputational survival of universities, also fueled the need for data collection and analysis to support efficient and strategic resource management (Chirikov, 2013). In this context, a cyclical pattern can be observed, in which the state initially drove institutional change, only for its diminishing role to prompt new management practices that further underscored the need for institutional research.

Internationally, the diffusion of institutional research has followed patterns similar to those in the United States, though with specific national contexts and distinctive phenomena involved (Calderón; Webber, 2015). For instance, in Europe, the United Kingdom and Sweden were early adopters of institutional research, driven by government agencies that sought to expand access to higher education. Other European nations, such as France, Italy, and Spain, followed suit later, as their decentralized higher education systems created a need for information to improve coordination between universities and local government bodies (Neave, 2003).

Despite these local differences, the internationalization of higher education has been a key driver of the global spread of institutional research. Chirikov (2013) identifies two ways in which internationalization has advanced the global development of institutional research. First, some countries and universities have explicitly or implicitly adopted the U.S. university model as a benchmark for excellence, with practices such as the establishment of institutional research offices and the creation of endowment funds being incorporated into national higher education plans and internal university strategies (Altbach; Salmi, 2011). Second, the expansion of international partnerships and the influx of foreign students, faculty, and resources have led universities to ensure they provide transparent and reliable data to meet the needs of global stakeholders (Chirikov, 2013).

In this context, academic rankings have gained prominence, despite their limited scientific validity, due to their media appeal and the clarity of their results, which help increase visibility for top-ranked universities. As a result, many universities have invested in improving their data infrastructure to ensure the accurate submission of information to ranking organizations (Chirikov, 2013). Some institutions have chosen to centralize this process within institutional research offices, while others maintain a decentralized model in which various departments manage the data required for rankings (Taylor; Hanlon; Yorke, 2013).

The organization of institutional research and its impact on process efficiency has been a subject of debate among scholars. Some argue that centralizing institutional research within a single, professionally staffed office ensures greater efficiency in management (Leimer; Terkla, 2009; Volkwein; Liu; Woodell, 2012). Others, however, point to the decentralized approach adopted by some leading research universities in the United States, suggesting that it can also be effective (Volkwein; Liu; Woodell, 2012).

Regardless of the level of centralization, mature institutional research offices are expected to fulfill four key functions: information authority, policy analyst, spin doctor, and scholar/researcher (Volkwein, 1999). As informational authorities, these offices are tasked with thoroughly documenting the academic, demographic, social, racial, and economic characteristics of teaching and administrative units, as well as the broader academic community (faculty, staff, and students). As policy analysts, institutional research offices support university management by producing studies that guide strategic decisions, such as resource allocation, administrative reforms, and financial adjustments. The spin doctor role involves presenting data in a way that highlights the institution's strengths and enhances its public image. Finally, as researchers, these offices are expected to produce objective, unbiased evaluations of the institution, which can be used for accreditation processes and other forms of external accountability.

Volkwein (1999) conceptualized these four functions within a two-dimensional framework that contrasts roles and organizational cultures (vertical axis) with goals and target audiences (horizontal axis). This framework illuminates the inherent tensions in institutional research: the balance between professional integrity and the demands of institutional interests, and the conflict between a focus on learning and organizational improvement versus the pressing need for accountability.

Figure 1 - Four purposes and roles of institutional research

Organizational role and culture	Purposes and audiences	
	Formative and Internal— for Improvement	Summative and External— for Accountability
Administrative and Institutional	To describe the institution— IR as information authority	To present the best case— IR as spin doctor
Academic and professional	To analyze alternatives— IR as policy analyst	To supply impartial evidence of effectiveness— IR as scholar and researcher

Source: Volkwein (1999).

Although institutional research activities had been carried out at various universities worldwide for a long time, its global diffusion has inscribed a new rationale in university management. Facilitated by the globalization of higher education, the spread of professional institutional research practices established in the United States reinforces an isomorphic movement around the U.S. research university model. In the following sections, we will examine how this movement has been facilitated by international academic rankings and its impacts on public universities in Brazil.

3 METHODOLOGY

In order to understand the emergence of institutional research offices in Brazil and the influence of global rankings on this process³, we selected for analysis three of the highest-ranked Brazilian universities in these rankings: USP, Unicamp, and UFRJ⁴. Their placement in global rankings was used as a selection criterion, considering that

³ This article was written within the context of the doctoral thesis rankings academics in Brazil and the United States: Contours of a global experience and the research project, internationalization of higher education: uses and impacts of international academic rankings on research universities in Brazil supported by CNPq.

⁴ To parametrize the definition of the research cases, we considered the results of the latest editions of the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), Times Higher Education (THE), and Shanghai Rankings. USP and Unicamp have notable regional prominence in all three rankings, holding the top two positions in the country in two of them (QS and THE). We included a third university in the analysis to incorporate the particularities of the federal higher education system. Consequently, we chose UFRJ as it ranks among the best federal universities in the country in all three rankings analyzed.

the lack of prominence in these rankings generally leads institutions to focus on other classifications, whether national rankings or even official evaluations. A preliminary verification confirmed that the selected universities had not only recently established their institutional research offices but had also been significantly influenced by rankings in the process.

Data collection was carried out through a survey of official documents and university council meeting minutes from the period 2010-2020, as well as interviews with leaders from the respective universities. Between 2020 and 2022, 23 interviews⁵ were conducted with professors from USP, Unicamp, and UFRJ who held positions such as rector, vice-rector, pro-rector, superintendent, and coordinator, as well as with staff from various levels of central administration and board members of faculty associations. A semi-structured interview model was adopted to balance the researchers' data collection objectives with the richness of interviewees' spontaneous responses.

The interview script included specific questions created to each institution and interviewee, structured around five common investigative axes: history, representation, governance, relative authority, and legitimacy. In the history axis, we explored the emergence of global rankings and the first impressions they caused in the institution. The representation axis included questions about how the institution perceived its ranking results and how it reacted to its placement. The governance axis assessed the impact of rankings on university governance, verifying whether rankings influenced meetings and strategic planning. In the relative authority axis, we analyzed the authority of rankings compared to other forms of internal or external evaluation. Finally, the legitimacy axis sought to understand how and why rankings managed to establish themselves as legitimate assessments of academic quality.

The analysis of official documents aimed to understand the role of institutional research offices within formal university structures, as well as official justifications for their creation. University council meeting minutes, in turn, revealed academic community reactions, indicating the degree of faculty and staff adherence to institutional changes. Finally, the interviews provided the opportunity to recover historical processes behind the creation of these offices, based on the accounts of those involved.

Drawing on Volkwein (1999), framework of institutional research office functions, we applied a deductive-exploratory categorization method (Miles; Huberman; Saldaña, 2014). This means that categories were pre-established and later used to characterize the offices under study. Documents and interviews were read, and evidence of each function's performance was extracted. A comparative analysis was

⁵ The interviews were conducted remotely, using a videoconferencing platform.

then conducted to differentiate the offices based on their degree of institutional maturity. Institutional maturity was assessed based on four criteria: (i) professionalization, (ii) formalization within the university structure, (iii) scope of activity scope, and (iv) support for planning and decision-making.

4 INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH OFFICES IN BRAZIL

Institutional research offices gained prominence in Brazil through the Métricas.edu project, created to foster discussions on academic performance metrics and international comparisons within universities. The initiative stemmed from reflections on a master's thesis titled *Competing on the World Stage: The University of São Paulo and Global University Rankings*, authored by Justin Axel-Berg and supervised by Jacques Marcovitch, former rector of USP (Axel-Berg, 2015). The positive reception of the thesis motivated committee members to seek institutional support and funding for a project that would extend the research beyond USP. As a result, they collaborated with the Council of Rectors of São Paulo State Universities (CRUESP) to establish the Métricas.edu project in 2017, with financial support from the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP) (Interview 2, 2020).

Métricas.edu is linked to FAPESP's Public Policy Program, meaning that its analyses are directly connected to changes in university governance regarding performance indicators. Coordinated by Jacques Marcovitch, the project includes associated researchers and the USP/Unicamp/Unesp administrative group, which consists of members from the administrations of these three universities. The project's initial goal was to structure a system of academic performance indicators for São Paulo state universities to enable both the monitoring and enhancement of their results in international comparisons (Métricas.edu, 2017b). Achieving this goal required close coordination with university administrations, with the administrative group playing a key role in identifying and facilitating the implementation of policies proposed by the project.

From the project's earliest meetings, one of its priorities was the design, structuring, and implementation of intelligence units within the affiliated universities to enable them to collect, submit, and analyze academic performance indicators (Métricas.edu, 2017a). At least in the project's initial phase, there was a strong association between academic performance metrics and global rankings, to the extent that discussions of metrics were nearly synonymous with rankings. Accordingly, Métricas.edu's first initiatives regarding intelligence units involved two key actions: first, developing an institutional position on the relevance of academic rankings for university management; and second, evaluating the structures for collecting, submitting, and analyzing performance metrics within the affiliated universities. It was determined that, despite their limitations, rankings served as useful tools for benchmarking and accountability. Additionally, according to Métricas.edu, São Paulo

state universities' data structures were overly reactive, focused on past performance, whereas intelligence units would be forward-looking, supporting decision-making and academic planning (Marcovitch, 2018a).

The institutional model of the intelligence units proposed by the project was based on institutional research offices in U.S. universities. Marcovitch (2018a) highlights the case of the University of California, emphasizing the strategic role of its Institutional Research and Academic Planning Office in managing information across multiple campuses and producing evidence to support institutional assessment and decision-making in various dimensions of California's public higher education system. In this context, one of the project's associated researchers, Marisa Beppu (Unicamp), visited three universities in Massachusetts to gather information and insights that could guide the development of intelligence units in the affiliated Brazilian universities (Métricas.edu, 2019).

Over time, Métricas.edu expanded its scope, shifting its focus from international rankings to other themes. Currently, the project explores six interrelated topics: responsible research assessment, open science, curricular integration of extension programs, data management offices, university governance, and society-centered metrics. These themes are reflected in Métricas.edu's main activities, which include organizing workshops, forums, and seminars; offering an academic performance metrics and international comparisons training course for university leaders and staff; conducting updated analyses and providing recommendations on the performance of affiliated universities in international rankings; and publishing the *Repensar a Universidade* collection, which currently comprises three volumes (Marcovitch, 2018b, 2019, 2023). Among the participants of the three cohorts of the training course are leaders and staff from the institutional research offices of the three universities examined in this study.

The brief history of Métricas.edu reveals that, although rankings were the starting point for its activities, the project has been undergoing a process of expanding its scope. This broader scope is materializing in its current proposal to become a Research, Innovation, and Dissemination Center supported by FAPESP (Métricas.edu, 2023). The project has played a crucial role in disseminating institutional research in Brazil, whether through organizing seminars and workshops or training professionals responsible for establishing the country's first offices dedicated to this field. Ultimately, what began as a project on rankings has evolved into a think tank focused on institutional research and university governance (Interview 2, 2020).

The next section details the structuring process of the intelligence units at USP and Unicamp and how these experiences inspired UFRJ to follow a similar path.

5 UNIVERSITY OF SÃO PAULO

Before the establishment of an institutional research office at USP, data management at the university was handled by the Permanent Data Integration Group of the USP Academic System (GPID). The group's members were appointed by the rector and represented the various institutional units where data was produced (USP, 2011). This group was responsible for responding to academic rankings, with a representative from the Superintendence of Information Technology in charge of data collection and submission. The rest of the group focused on refining, compiling data from their respective units, and analyzing the university's academic results (USP, 2017).

Until the creation of USP's institutional research office, the university had an institutional coordination effort dedicated to bridging the gap between information management and contemporary demands for transparency and accountability. At that time, the university's data structure reflected its own decentralized governance model. Although the data from different academic units were integrated into a data repository, strategic planning and decision-making were the responsibility of GPID. This coordination functioned as a committee under the leadership of the vice-rector, who was responsible for directing it alongside many other administrative responsibilities.

In the second half of 2017, Métricas.edu began its activities by inviting affiliated universities to present how they conducted data collection, submission, and analysis for academic rankings. From that point on, closer ties developed between Métricas.edu and university leadership teams, with a key milestone being the project's first workshop, attended by administrators from the three São Paulo state universities.

The growing connection between university administrations and Métricas.edu coincided with a convergence of goals regarding data management. It is not surprising, then, that less than a year after the project's initial meetings, USP's administration decided to establish its own intelligence unit: the Academic Performance Indicators Management Office (EGIDA). Created under Ordinance GR No. 7256, dated June 29, 2018, EGIDA was founded with the following objectives: (i) operating USP's Transparency Portal; (ii) developing and refining performance indicators; (iii) preparing and publishing USP's Statistical Yearbook; (iv) facilitating public access to information through clearer and more effective communication; (v) improving the university's data collection, processing, and analysis system; (vi) interacting with agencies responsible for national and international academic rankings (USP, 2018). EGIDA reports directly to the Rector's Office, which appoints the office's coordinator.

A brief comparison shows that EGIDA assumed responsibilities previously handled by GPID. The university opted for a centralized approach to strategic data management, now under the direction of a faculty member dedicated to the field. In addition to a coordinator and a vice-coordinator, the office's team includes three other staff members. Given the lack of professionalization in institutional research in Brazil,

team selection was based less on technical criteria and more on the interest of university administration staff. With the exception of one staff member with experience in bibliometrics and academic rankings, the others were recruited internally, based on their expressed interest and alignment of expectations (Interviews 8, 9, 10).

Initially, there was no formal training or technical capacity-building for the office's staff. However, the Métricas.edu training course partially filled this gap, as all three staff members at the time participated in it. The lack of structure and standardized procedures for staff training at the university also led to what they themselves referred to as "learning on demand"—that is, the work routine itself set the knowledge required to perform tasks.

That's actually something characteristic of the university; [...] this difficulty in providing additional training when you switch fields, or even when you first come in and it's not your specific area of work. This is the first official training we've received related to metrics [the course offered by the project]. Other than that, I think in day-to-day work, and with the demands that come up, we've just learned to deal with it (Interview 8, 2021).

The actions carried out by EGIDA during the period of this research indicate that the office has acted as informational authority and spin doctor. As an informational authority, EGIDA "is the main institutional channel for consulting data and institutional information" (Interview 7, 2021). Thus, the office is involved not only in collecting and publishing university data but also in improving data gathering and producing new academic performance indicators (USP, 2021b).

In terms of data collection and visualization, EGIDA has assumed responsibility for producing the Statistical Yearbook and collecting and organizing data for international rankings, becoming the central coordinator of information produced across various academic units. The mobilization for submitting data for Times Higher Education Impact 2020 exemplifies EGIDA's role as an information coordinator. At that time, the office was responsible for organizing the collection of data related to all of USP's activities impacting the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Although THE only required data for four SDGs for participation in the ranking, EGIDA managed to submit information for all 17 (Interview 1, 2020).

Regarding the creation of indicators, EGIDA organized Working Groups (GTs) with representatives from relevant knowledge areas, who proposed performance indicators, which were later included in the Statistical Yearbook (USP, 2021b). The GT for Museum Indicators, for instance, brought together representatives from the university's different museums, who identified a wide range of performance indicators relevant for evaluating their units (USP, 2021a). In total, four GTs have been completed, and another four are ongoing (USP, [n.d.]).

As a spin doctor, EGIDA assumed the management of the Transparency Portal, also acting in the collection and organization of data for accountability purposes. In 2019, the São Paulo State Legislative Assembly set up a Parliamentary Inquiry Commission (CPI) to investigate possible irregularities in the management of state universities. EGIDA, as a support body for accountability processes, took on the task of presenting indicators that could highlight USP's importance to the society of São Paulo.

EGIDA was under a lot of pressure to support our leaders, to respond to questions from a CPI (Parliamentary Inquiry Commission) in the São Paulo State Legislative Assembly, which wanted... well, it wanted to say that the state universities are inefficient; actually, that they consume a lot of resources and don't give anything back to society. It was really tough. Really tough. So, EGIDA kept looking for numbers, numbers. So that the Rector, so that the Pro-Rectors, could go to those very tense testimonies in the CPI and actually present indicators of what USP represents for society (Interview 1, 2020).

Moreover, the office identified that the university was not meeting one of the legal requirements related to transparency and social responsibility—the preparation of a University Services Overview (USP, 2021b). In light of this, EGIDA began to develop this document, compiling a set of information of public interest from the university, organized in a concise manner. The overview includes highly relevant information for society, such as: extension courses, museums, entry requirements for the university, and medical, hospital, and dental services (USP, 2023).

More recently, EGIDA has been focusing on its development as a political analyst, aiming to conduct studies that can support decision-making at the university. The stage of activities is still in its early phase, but the office has already recognized that its improvement as an institutional research body necessarily involves developing its capacity to support decision-making in university administration.

Finally, in advancing its mission as an institutional research body, EGIDA has focused on proposing surveys and research projects aimed at deepening institutional self-knowledge, evaluating the policies and programs implemented by the university, and providing support to managers and decision-makers (USP, 2021b).

The creation of EGIDA reflects a new attitude at the University of São Paulo towards the global trend surrounding the use of academic performance metrics in university management. Just like in Métricas.edu, rankings served as an entryway to this institutional culture, which has since expanded beyond international comparisons within the university. However, there are at least two limitations that have constrained EGIDA's development as an institutional research office: one structural and one functional.

On the one hand, its structure remains underdeveloped. There is no systematic technical training for its members, and the office is not integrated into the university's formal structure. Created by an ordinance, EGIDA could be dissolved at the discretion of any rectorate. Its permanent structuring requires approval by the University Council, a step that has yet to be proposed by any rectoral administration since its creation.

On the other hand, its role as an informational authority remains more responsive than proactive. While EGIDA has organized Working Groups (GTs) to discuss new performance indicators, these have been incorporated only into the Statistical Yearbook, as a means of improving the university's accountability. Other initiatives to coordinate units for data collection and systematization have responded to external demands, such as the Legislative Assembly's CPI on universities and filling out academic rankings forms. While these initiatives contribute to institutional self-awareness, they lack the strategic character necessary to guide university policies and programs, according to Volkwein typology (1999). It is true that ongoing studies and analyses could help EGIDA achieve this strategic role, but the absence of structure and qualification may limit the evolution of institutional research at the university.

6 UNIVERSITY OF CAMPINAS

The discussions within Métricas.edu regarding the creation of intelligence units were met with enthusiasm at the University of Campinas. In addition to the university's representation in the administrative group, carried out by the General Coordination Office (CGU), faculty members from the University of Campinas actively participated in the project as affiliated researchers. During these discussions, the university decided to send its Pro-Rector for University Development (PRDU) and its Superintendent of Information Technology to Massachusetts (USA) to visit the institutional research offices of three universities: Harvard University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the University of Massachusetts. Following this visit, the PRDU decided to establish a working group (GT) to discuss institutional research office models to determine the most suitable structure for implementation at the university (Interview 5, 2022; Métricas.edu, 2019).

At the University of Campinas, the creation of an institutional research office was designed to meet both internal and external objectives. Internally, university administrators recognized that the institutional database—Sistema de Informação de Pesquisa e Extensão (SIPEX - 1992) —was already insufficient to support efficient university governance procedures. Externally, it was noted that the University of Campinas was not in compliance with the regulations and standards established by the Lei de Acesso à Informação (Brazilian Public Records Law), leading the São Paulo State Court of Accounts to repeatedly question the university's transparency practices (Atvars, 2021). Furthermore, the establishment of the CPI University Management created a demand for institutional data accessibility, which accelerated the creation of

a dedicated data management office within the university (Interview 5, 2022; Martins; Barreyro, 2023). In response to these internal and external demands, the University of Campinas established the Office of Data and Decision Support (EDAT) in 2019.

Institutionalized in 2020 through an internal certification process, EDAT is part of the university's permanent structure, integrated into the General Coordination Office. The office consists of a team of 13 members, mostly from the field of Information Technology: a cabinet advisor, a technical advisor, a technical team of seven members, and four external collaborators. As was the case with EGIDA at the University of São Paulo, members of EDAT also completed the Métricas.edu advanced training course (Interview 5, 2022).

EDAT's mission is to manage the university's institutional data structure to support decision-making and strategic planning while ensuring compliance with transparency and accountability procedures (University of Campinas, 2023). This mission is carried out through at least ten key activities: (i) the University of Campinas Transparency Portal; (ii) the Citizen Service Portal; (iii) the Data Catalog; (iv) the Service Charter; (v) the digitalization of high-level administrative processes; (vi) the development of indicators and metrics for planning; (vii) institutional reports; (viii) data curation; (ix) participation in thematic committees; and (x) compliance with the General Data Protection Law (Atvars, 2021).

Strategically, EDAT operates in two key areas. In institutional evaluation processes, it is responsible for providing and consolidating institutional data used to assess the university's status (Atvars; Serafim; Carneiro, 2022). Additionally, the office was designed to develop surveys and other studies that support both institutional assessment and decision-making.

The generation of institutional indicators for management and the use of the office as a space for conducting surveys within the university to identify issues of an institutional nature, as well as those related to human and social relations, and so on. [The data office] has these two functions: one focused on capturing perceptions and the other on performing a more data-driven management for strategic decision-making (Interview 5, 2020).

In strategic planning, the office is responsible for collecting and detailing the data that support each indicator linked to the established objectives (Serafim; Rodrigues; Atvars, 2021). These objectives and their respective indicators are defined by the Institutional Strategic Planning Commission (COPEI) based on the previous institutional evaluation cycle. EDAT is tasked with monitoring each of these indicators.

The Data Office (EDAT) is the CGU body responsible for providing the necessary data associated with each indicator, enabling the institution to assess its current status and define its objectives—that is, its targets. This represents the final stage in the development of the 2021–2025 Planes and is under EDAT's responsibility. The office is gathering data for each indicator, automating processes where possible, and applying a systematic methodology. Its workflow follows a technically well-structured approach, including a Technical Manual that details each data point, its source, extraction method, as well as the definition of data and metadata (Serafim; Rodrigues; Atvars, 2021,).

Regarding academic rankings, the University of Campinas adopted a structure and procedures distinct from those of the University of São Paulo. Interaction with ranking agencies remained within the scope of the Vice Provost for University Development (PRDU) and under the responsibility of the same staff member who had previously handled these tasks before the creation of EDAT. The university's institutional research office was assigned the role of supporting data collection and submission, aiming to improve the accessibility of the information requested by rankings. In this regard, interaction with ranking agencies is just one of many activities in which EDAT provides support for data collection. Nevertheless, the significance of rankings in the creation of the office is emphasized by the staff member responsible, even though efforts to support data collection and form completion were undertaken only afterward.

It was one of the motivations, and we were able to work more intensively in 2021, especially after we had defined the strategic indicators. So, the strategic indicators allowed the office to leverage its structure, really work on ingesting data from various different sources, gain that knowledge, and then the ranking process became easier. Now we have the maturity to handle responding to rankings (Interview 5, 2020).

The description presented here reveals that the EDAT has assumed at least three of the four fundamental functions of an institutional research office. It has responded to both internal and external demands that motivated its creation: it has consolidated itself as an informational authority by centralizing the management of the university's data; it has also served as a spin doctor, structuring the main tools for interacting with society and ensuring compliance with accountability policies. Furthermore, the office has taken on strategic roles for the university's planning and management, fulfilling the role of a political analyst. Among the responsibilities that can be associated with this role, the support for institutional evaluation, monitoring strategic objectives through performance indicators, and the development of specific studies for decision-making stand out. Regarding this last aspect, the EDAT is currently conducting two internal surveys: one on the administrative organization of technical schools and another on

how scholarships and financial aid support the university's inclusion and retention goals.

The experience of structuring the EDAT reveals some important points regarding the relationship between rankings and institutional research. By maintaining interaction with ranking agencies outside the scope of the office's responsibilities, the University of Campinas limited the influence of rankings on data governance within the institution. This limitation occurred both by alleviating the high demand for data collection and form submission generated by the rankings and by restricting their influence on the selection of indicators that make up the strategic objectives, which are formulated within the CGU. The EDAT itself confirms that its efforts to facilitate the collection and submission of data for rankings (which is managed by the PRDU) were only truly undertaken after the institutional definition of strategic indicators for university planning and management. In this regard, the experience of the University of Campinas suggests that distancing the high demands generated by academic rankings may allow institutional research offices to focus their development on strategic activities in university governance.

Nevertheless, just as with USP, the lack of professionalization in institutional research in Brazil creates barriers to the training of office members. The recognition of these barriers led the University of Campinas to consider affiliating with the Association for Institutional Research (AIR), an idea that was ultimately suspended due to budgetary restrictions imposed on the university during the COVID-19 health crisis (Interview 6, 2022). Still, EDAT members have kept up with AIR activities, either by studying the works published by the association or attending events organized by it. This stance by EDAT reveals that, although Métricas.edu offers updating courses, workshops, and forums on the subject, these initiatives remain limited in scope and purpose. This suggests that the lack of professionalization of institutional research in the country restricts the possibilities for its practical and theoretical deepening, especially due to the reliance on scientific productions and professional practices from a field of higher education that is quite distinct from the Brazilian context. The University of Campinas has tried to circumvent some of these limitations by aiming to diversify the EDAT team, envisioning new hires with diversified profiles: educators, statisticians, economists, big data analysts, and communication specialists (Atvars, 2021). However, it seems that the full development of these offices will depend on interinstitutional efforts to professionalize institutional research in the field of Brazilian higher education.

7 FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OF RIO DE JANEIRO

As in the case of Métricas.edu, academic rankings opened space for discussions on performance metrics and international comparisons at UFRJ. During the 2019-2022 rectorate, the administration decided to structure the data collection and submission process for rankings, a task previously handled by a professor appointed by the Rector's Office. The administration viewed UFRJ as an institution with an international vocation and considered global rankings as tools to strengthen initiatives in that direction. However, the university's data infrastructure did not even allow access to basic information, such as the distribution of faculty by race and gender. This reinforced the perception that UFRJ lacked the necessary structures and conditions to provide data that accurately reflected the university's reality in academic rankings. At the same time, insights from Egida-USP guided efforts to structure data, leading to the creation of an institutional research office.

We need to pay attention to international rankings because of internationalization—after all, we have been an international university from the very beginning. [...] So, we are an international institution, but we will only expand our international reach if we also manage to meet the rankings' criteria. [...] Look, I had only been in the position for three months when he [the Egida coordinator] told me that USP had an office dedicated to this. [...] And I said, "That's an excellent idea" (Interview 3, 2022).

UFRJ then established the Indicator Management Committee (GID) through Ordinance 8701, dated December 7, 2020. According to the document itself, GID's responsibilities include: i) collecting and submitting data for rankings; ii) systematically analyzing the methodologies and databases used by rankings; iii) facilitating and expediting data collection through automated systems; and iv) producing reports with recommendations to improve the university's ranking performance (UFRJ, 2020). At its inception, the committee comprised seven members, in addition to the chair, all of whom were faculty members except for one administrative assistant. The composition was later modified by Ordinance No. 5237/2022, which listed nine members: four faculty members, four technical staff, and one postdoctoral researcher, in addition to the chair.

The debate on academic performance metrics and international comparisons took a distinct path at UFRJ. Unlike the other two universities analyzed in this study, UFRJ is not a member of Métricas.edu, as institutional affiliation in the project is restricted to São Paulo state universities. Distanced from the international discourse on institutional research, which became a model for discussions within Métricas.edu, UFRJ drew inspiration from Egida-USP in establishing GID. Moreover, studies produced by Métricas.edu guided GID's research, highlighting that, despite its international orientation, UFRJ structured its debate on academic performance metrics around the still emerging Brazilian experience. Given the importance of academic rankings in the

national discussion on performance metrics and international comparisons, GID was created with a narrow scope focused on ranking-related activities.

GID's annual report, published in December 2021, details the results achieved in its first year. The report's first section analyzes the indicators used by the selected rankings and describes GID's data submission process. Due to the high volume of required data, the complexity of collection, and tight submission deadlines, the university opted not to participate in some rankings, while others were only partially completed (UFRJ, 2021). For instance, the university decided to better prepare for the UI GreenMetric submission and to participate in the Times Higher Education Impact Ranking by assessing only four Sustainable Development Goals. Beyond mobilizing efforts to ensure more effective data collection—thus avoiding underreporting university reports—GID also sought to update its list of academic and employer nominees for reputational surveys (UFRJ, 2021). While analyzing the rankings produced by Times Higher Education, the GID identified that the university had not made any nominations since 2015. Recognizing the importance of these nominations—since they account for 50% of the final score—the GID subsequently took steps to address the issue, nominating 298 academics and 20 employers.

The report also examines UFRJ's performance in major international rankings to provide recommendations for improvement, which are outlined in the final section of the document. In general, inconsistencies were found in how UFRJ was cited in institutional affiliations within scientific articles. A lack of standardization was also observed in the identification of faculty members, who sometimes appeared under multiple different names in the databases used by rankings. Furthermore, when compared to other Brazilian universities, UFRJ has demonstrated a strong volume of publications; however, the number of citations received remains below that of its peers. Finally, it was also noted that the university's results are underreported, either because international databases do not account for the entirety of Brazilian academic output or because scientific publications by the institution's administrative staff were not considered (UFRJ, 2021).

The recommendations provided in the report focused more on improving data collection and submission processes rather than implementing strategic changes to enhance performance in academic rankings. The GID acknowledges structural limitations that hinder further improvement, leaving the priority of ensuring that the university's submitted data is as accurate and standardized as possible. Additionally, the report suggests closer collaboration with the Permanent Evaluation Committee (CPA) to integrate data produced by the office—or extracted directly from rankings—into institutional self-assessment. Finally, it mentions the possibility of creating a Brazilian version of U-Multirank, a European platform for academic performance metrics that compares higher education institutions in a multidimensional,

customizable, and non-hierarchical manner (Van Vught; Ziegele, 2012; Prado, 2022). This reference to the platform indicates an intention to adapt academic performance analysis to the structural conditions of Brazilian higher education (UFRJ, 2021).

The analysis of the activities described above suggests that the GID has been limited to the role of a spin doctor (Volkwein, 1999). By confining its efforts to academic rankings and remaining unaligned with institutional evaluation, the GID serves primarily to report UFRJ's academic performance rather than establishing itself as an informational authority capable of fostering institutional self-knowledge. Its structure remains temporary and subject to dissolution at the discretion of the university leadership, with a team that lacks members under an exclusive dedication regime. However, while there is a stated intention to expand the office's strategic role, the structural conditions required for this transformation have yet to be established (UFRJ, 2021).

Despite its international focus, UFRJ modeled its institutional research office on still-emerging Brazilian experiences. Unlike Unicamp, which drew inspiration from foreign universities with more established expertise in institutional research, UFRJ based its approach on the still-developing USP model, as well as discussions within the Métricas.edu initiative.

The two books "*Repensar a Universidade*" were extremely important to me; they prompted internal reflection, allowing me to think about the metrics and discuss the debate around rankings—what they mean and how to use them, right? The idea that they are snapshots, but imperfect ones. So, [...] this contact with USP was crucial in the initial stage of establishing the office (Interview 4, 2021).

GID's national orientation becomes even more evident in its activity report. There are suggestions for UFRJ to develop a portal similar to USP's Statistical Yearbook, and all the bibliographic references utilized were published by Métricas.edu. Furthermore, all the universities selected for benchmarking UFRJ's performance are Brazilian (UFRJ, 2021).

By drawing on an experience still in development, the GID finds itself confined to the starting point of the discussion on institutional research in Brazil: academic rankings. Although there is an intention to expand its scope of action, the workload demanded by rankings seems to take up all the limited time available for the office's activities. Additionally, the lack of adequate resources and support limits the GID's ability to fulfill its goals, as it continues to seek a more strategic position within UFRJ's university governance.

8 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The rise of international rankings in higher education has prompted significant changes in how universities collect, produce, and analyze institutional data. The indirect pressure of international comparisons on ranked universities has fostered the development of a new institutional culture in university governance, both in Brazil and globally, centered on managing a broad range of quantitative data.

The role of rankings in institutional research offices has varied across universities, shaping their functions and aspirations. While UFRJ restructured its data system primarily to meet ranking requirements, USP and Unicamp have worked towards strengthening data-driven governance in their own unique ways. Moreover, an analysis of the approaches adopted by each institution reveals a paradox: rankings can both foster and impede the advancement of institutional research. On one hand, the process of completing ranking surveys necessitates more sophisticated data collection and production methods, driving universities to enhance their data infrastructure. On the other hand, the overwhelming workload generated by rankings, coupled with their intense focus on comparisons, may restrict the strategic potential of institutional research offices.

This study interprets the development of institutional research in Brazil as a reflection of an institutional culture influenced by international academic rankings. However, issues related to university policies, such as accountability and internationalization, as well as public policies like transparency and data protection, have also played a significant role in the creation of institutional research offices. By emphasizing the influence of rankings in this process, we do not seek to overstate their importance but rather to highlight how these rankings, historically marginal in higher education, have increasingly gained relevance in university administration. This work contributes to critical reflections and advances studies on the implications of the proliferation of academic performance data in university governance and administration.

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