

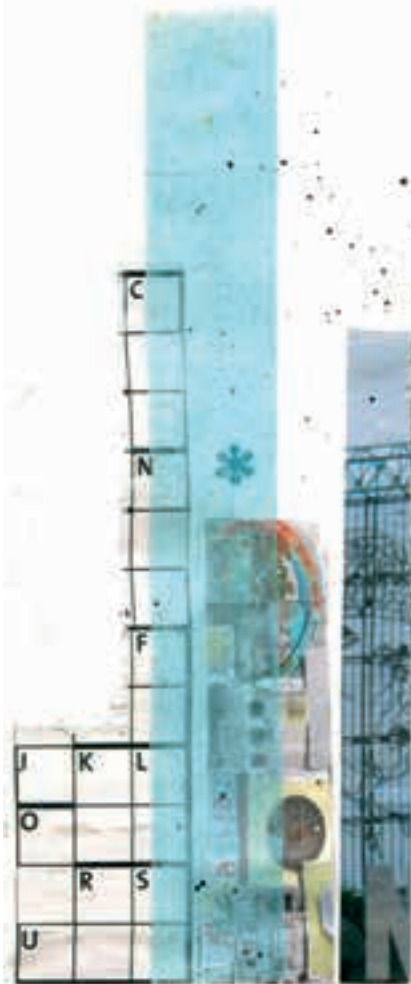
# Excellence in the humanities

Brazilian courses  
distinguish themselves on  
the international scene

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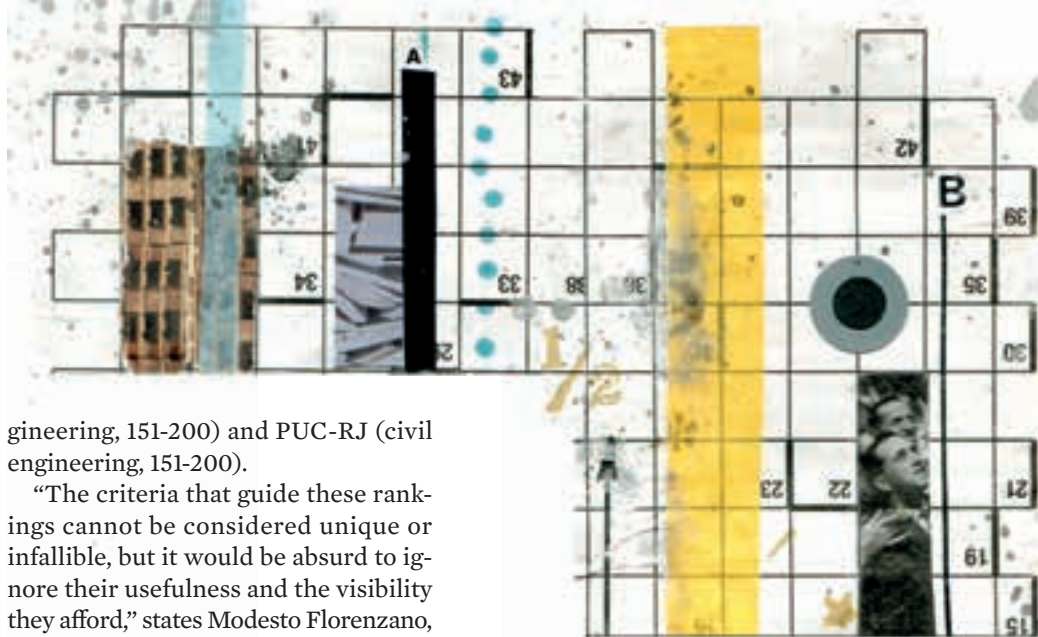




At the beginning of July, QS (Quacquarelli Symonds), which has evaluated and classified universities around the world every year since 2004, published the first global university rankings that rated the top institutions in each of various areas of knowledge (these rankings are available at [www.topuniversities.com](http://www.topuniversities.com)). Brazilian universities are relatively highly ranked, appearing among the top 200 institutions for various topics, particularly in the broad categories of the “social sciences” and the “arts and humanities.” For each field, the top 50 universities are listed in rank order; the institutions in the 51-100 range are then listed in alphabetical order, followed by an alphabetical listing of the universities in the 101-150 range and an alphabetical listing of the universities in the 151-200 range. Six Brazilian institutions appear in the list of the top 200 institutions for the human sciences as a whole: two state universities (USP and Unicamp), two federal universities (UFRJ and UFMG), the Getúlio Vargas Foundation (FGV) and the Pontifical Catholic University

of Rio (PUC-Rio). This list also includes two universities from other Latin American countries (Universidad Nacional Autónoma do México and PUC-Chile).

USP appears in the 51-100 group for philosophy and sociology and is in the 151-200 group for geography and international relations. Unicamp is included in the 101 – 150 group for philosophy and in the 151 – 200 group for statistics and operational research, whereas UFRJ has the converse rankings for these two fields of study. FGV and UFMG appear in the 151-200 group for international relations and philosophy, respectively. For comparison, in the exact and biomedical sciences, only three Brazilian universities are ranked: USP (agronomy, 51-100; civil engineering, 151-200), Unicamp (electrical and electronic en-



gineering, 151-200) and PUC-RJ (civil engineering, 151-200).

“The criteria that guide these rankings cannot be considered unique or infallible, but it would be absurd to ignore their usefulness and the visibility they afford,” states Modesto Florenzano, deputy dean of the School of Philosophy, Literature and Human Sciences (FFLCH) at USP, which houses three of the departments that were mentioned in the QS rankings (namely, philosophy, sociology and geography).

“The main purpose of these lists – and this is their economic basis – is to offer people who intend to enter these institutions a panorama of the universities. That is why carrying out research by discipline is very useful,” explains Rogério Meneghini, a specialist in scientometrics, the study of the quantitative aspects of science and scientific production. “The rankings weren’t produced to give a broad view of the quality of the universities, but they ended up serving this purpose.”

QS, which is headquartered in the United Kingdom and has offices in various countries, prepares its rankings to be used as guides by students who wish to study outside their own cities or, in particular, their native countries. This objective is the reason that special attention is devoted in the rankings to the degree of



internationalization of the institutions that were evaluated. The recent rankings are based on three major criteria: academic reputation (professors are invited to evaluate courses and universities other than their own), reputation among employers (the quality of the professionals that graduate from each institution) and the number of citations of the academic publications from each institution.

QS considers its inclusion of the “employability” criterion to be the primary distinguishing factor of its rankings. However, this criterion is criticized because it represents an index that is not necessarily related to the quality of universities’ intellectual production. “For our target audience, it would be disproportional if we were to place more emphasis on academic research than we already do,” says Ben Sowter, head of the information unit of QS. “Furthermore, the other rankings already provide this emphasis, in part because of the type of data internationally available and in part due to the history of how the rankings

## Latin America in the QS university rankings: social sciences

| INSTITUTION                                      | STATISTICS AND OPERATING RESEARCH | SOCIOLOGY | POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS | LAW    | ECONOMICS AND ECONOMETRICS |
|--|-----------------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------------|--------|----------------------------|
| National Autonomous University of Mexico         | —                                 | 44        | —                                    | —      | 151-200                    |
| University of São Paulo                          | —                                 | 51-100    | 151-200                              | —      | —                          |
| Federal University of Rio de Janeiro             | 101-150                           | 151-200   | —                                    | —      | —                          |
| Pontifical Catholic University of Chile          | 151-200                           | —         | —                                    | 51-100 | —                          |
| Getúlio Vargas Foundation                        | —                                 | —         | 151-200                              | —      | —                          |
| State University of Campinas                     | 151-200                           | —         | —                                    | —      | —                          |
| Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro | —                                 | —         | 101-150                              | —      | —                          |

SOURCE QUACQUARELLI SYMONDS

# QS world university global rankings: philosophy

|         | INSTITUTION                          | COUNTRY        | ACADEMIC | EMPLOYABILITY | CITATIONS | POINTS |
|---------|--------------------------------------|----------------|----------|---------------|-----------|--------|
| 1       | Harvard University                   | United States  | 99,6     | 96,3          | 50,3      | 94,3   |
| 2       | University of Oxford                 | United Kingdom | 100,0    | 95,4          | 41,0      | 93,6   |
| 3       | University of Cambridge              | United Kingdom | 94,5     | 100,0         | 51,9      | 90,8   |
| 4       | University of California at Berkeley | United States  | 88,4     | 65,4          | 73,3      | 84,6   |
| 5       | Princeton University                 | United States  | 80,1     | 39,7          | 81,6      | 76,2   |
| 6       | Australian National University       | Australia      | 73,8     | 52,8          | 95,1      | 73,8   |
| 7       | University of Toronto                | Canada         | 77,1     | 60,6          | 36,1      | 71,4   |
| 8       | Stanford University                  | United States  | 74,8     | 46,0          | 56,7      | 70,1   |
| 9       | Yale University                      | United States  | 73,2     | 64,4          | 22,1      | 67,2   |
| 10      | University of Chicago                | United States  | 71,1     | 50,4          | 13,8      | 63,3   |
| 51-100  | University of São Paulo              | Brazil         | 26,8     | 5,9           | 5,0       | –      |
| 101-150 | State University of Campinas         | Brazil         | 16,1     | 0,0           | 9,8       | –      |
| 151-200 | Federal University of Minas Gerais   | Brazil         | 10,7     | 0,0           | 8,5       | –      |
| 151-200 | Federal University of Rio de Janeiro | Brazil         | 14,4     | 0,0           | 0,0       | –      |

first appeared. The first international classification was created by the Chinese government [via the University of Shanghai] to highlight the performance of scientific research in their own universities in comparison with those in the West.”

The QS rankings are also not free from bias. A quick glance at the lists is sufficient to reveal the predominance of universities from English-speaking countries (not only the United States and the United Kingdom but also Canada and Australia). For instance, the philosophy rankings feature very few institutions from France and Germany, the countries that historically (and currently) have contributed most to this field of knowledge, and the universities from these nations that do appear are not particularly highly ranked. “How can the University of Frankfurt, which has Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth, be low on the list?” asks Ricardo Ribeiro Terra, a professor from the Department of Philosophy at FFLCH-USP and the coordinator of the human and social sciences department of FAPESP (which includes philosophy).

Terra also observes that although certain Brazilian universities are highly ranked with respect to various disciplines, such as sociology, the QS rankings consider very few of the articles in international publications that are produced by Brazilian researchers in these highly

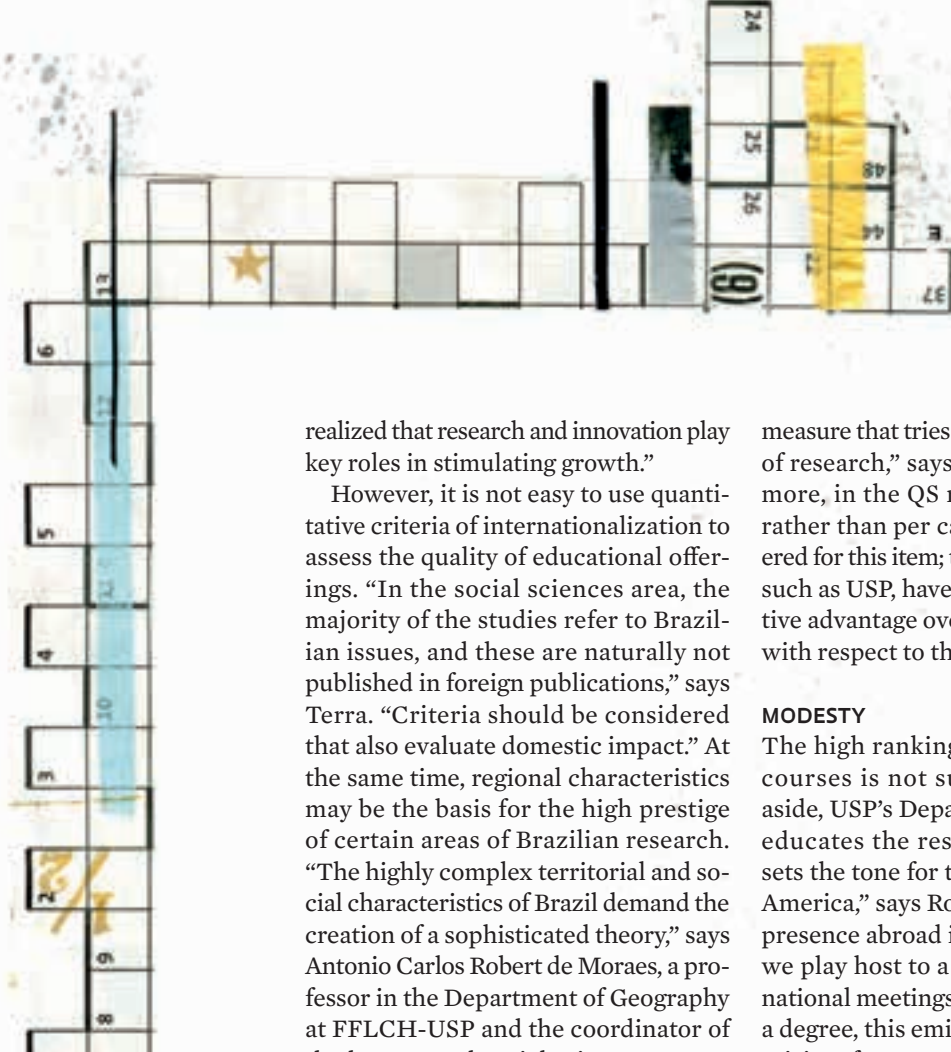
**We started out being international, and we came from a strong humanist tradition, says Florenzano from FFLCH.**

ranked subject areas. “This raises doubts as to the journals chosen and makes one suppose that they are limited to analytical philosophy of the type that predominates in the United States,” he says.

## FUNDING

Unsurprisingly, the international parameter of the English language is impossible to ignore. “There is a noticeable interest from foreign students wishing to study in Brazil, largely because of the possibility of obtaining funding for research at a very early stage in their academic careers. Even the scholarship seems attractive, but most of them don’t come because Portuguese is seen as a barrier,” says Meneghini.

Because of this situation, the weight placed on internationalization in the QS assessments is considered to be appropriate, and there is general agreement among various Brazilian academics that there continues to be a dearth of foreign students in Brazilian universities. “The main universities have always been meeting points for the best minds in the world,” says Sowter. “A large part of the drive for internationalization is conducted not only by institutions individually but also by government policies. Recently, universities have become centers for economic policy because governments have



realized that research and innovation play key roles in stimulating growth.”

However, it is not easy to use quantitative criteria of internationalization to assess the quality of educational offerings. “In the social sciences area, the majority of the studies refer to Brazilian issues, and these are naturally not published in foreign publications,” says Terra. “Criteria should be considered that also evaluate domestic impact.” At the same time, regional characteristics may be the basis for the high prestige of certain areas of Brazilian research. “The highly complex territorial and social characteristics of Brazil demand the creation of a sophisticated theory,” says Antonio Carlos Robert de Moraes, a professor in the Department of Geography at FFLCH-USP and the coordinator of the human and social sciences area at FAPESP (which includes geography).

Observers of international rankings are unanimous in stating that the criteria for these recently created rankings continue to require improvement and refinement. QS itself agrees with this, and its decision to create a ranking that categorized institutions by subject area represented an attempt to make these classifications more specific and useful.

“The most delicate question has to do with the possibility of producing criteria that are compatible with the different ways of producing knowledge in the various disciplines,” says Paula Montero, a professor from the Department of Anthropology at FFLCH-USP and the assistant coordinator of the Scientific Department at FAPESP. She believes that peer review (academic reputation) criteria are the most important: “When an area of knowledge is sufficiently developed and diversified, this type of external evaluation works very well.”

Despite its status as the most widely established criterion, the criterion of citations in academic publications is also the target of criticism. “I’ve never seen a

measure that tries to evaluate the quality of research,” says Meneghini. Furthermore, in the QS rankings, cumulative rather than per capita data are considered for this item; thus, huge universities, such as USP, have an inherent competitive advantage over smaller institutions with respect to this criterion.

#### MODESTY

The high ranking of the FFLCH-USP courses is not surprising. “Modesty aside, USP’s Department of Geography educates the rest of the country and sets the tone for the discipline in Latin America,” says Robert de Moraes. “Our presence abroad is very significant and we play host to a fair number of international meetings,” Terra continues. To a degree, this eminence stems from the origins of FFLCH, which was founded by foreign professors, particularly French academics, who immigrated to Brazil. FFLCH subsequently formed the basis for the creation of USP in the 1930s. “We began our existence in an international way, and we come from a strong humanist tradition,” says Florenzano.

“The social sciences in Brazil have always been of a relatively good standard



for historical reasons,” says Paula Montero. “However, the decline in the quality of public schools, the growth of higher education, the lack of performance assessment in universities and the relative isolation of human sciences with regard to international debate were factors that acted against the expansion and consolidation of this quality.”

The effects of tradition are reflected even for recent educational initiatives that are not part of the FFLCH, such as the course offerings of the Institute of International Relations (IRI). “I’m going to be very sincere with you. I think that in this ranking, we hitched a ride from the Department of Political Science, which is a lot older and better known than the IRI, which was created in 2004 and only has two years of graduate studies,” says Maria Hermínia Brandão Tavares Almeida, the director of the institute. Obviously,

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however, the quality of the IRI’s courses is reflected in its ranking.

For these reasons, the presence of institutions in the QS rankings and similar lists is both important and relative. “Only universities that are not very consistent allow themselves to be directed by demands for this type of survey, but they can be an element to be taken into account in academic guidelines,” says Marcelo Ridenti, who graduated with a degree in sociology at USP and is both a professor at Unicamp and the coordinator of human and social sciences at FAPESP (which includes sociology). “The assessment procedure has to start with the university itself, like the surveys that USP has undertaken periodically,” says Meneghini, who has participated in university assessment committees that involved contributions from foreign specialists. Florenzano agrees: “We mainly need to diagnose the quality of graduate courses, and this is the most important starting point.” ■

