



Instruments of Accountability in Brazilian Higher Education: Academic Rankings in the Parliamentary Inquiry Commission on the Administration of São Paulo State Universities¹

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Abstract: This study shows findings of an investigation into the forms of institutionalizing academic rankings as accountability tools for Brazilian public universities. The absence of institutional conditions which allowed the rise of these league tables in other countries - competitive admission markets and incorporation into public policies - evinces the peculiarity of the Brazilian case. This study examines the institutionalization of academic rankings in Brazil by analyzing references to rankings in the Parliamentary Inquiry Commission on the Administration of São Paulo State Universities, which took place in the São Paulo State Assembly from April 24, 2019, to November 5, 2019. Document analysis was conducted on audios and transcriptions of

¹ This is an unofficial translation, provided by the author, of the original peer-reviewed Portuguese-language version.

all 20 Commission meetings and the final report published at the São Paulo State Official Journal. Our findings indicate the idea of ranking performances as evidence of academic quality and excellence, raising questions regarding the rankings and governance structures of universities. Academic rankings have become relevant references to form opinions at the São Paulo State Assembly, prompting universities to actively respond to rankings and holding them accountable for their results.

Keywords: higher education; academic rankings; accountability; public universities

Instrumentos de *accountability* en la educación superior brasileña: La presencia de los *rankings* académicos en la Comisión Investigadora de las Universidades Públicas de São Paulo

Resumen: Este texto presenta los resultados de una investigación que analizó los *rankings* académicos como instrumentos de rendición de cuentas de las universidades públicas brasileñas, centrándose en el análisis del uso de los *rankings* en el ámbito de la Comisión Investigadora de las Universidades de São Paulo, desarrollada en el Congreso del Estado de São Paulo, Brasil, entre el 24 de abril y el 5 de noviembre de 2019. Se trata de una investigación documental que analizó el informe final y los audios y transcripciones de las 20 reuniones de la Comisión. Se realizó análisis de contenido, seleccionando fragmentos en los que se mencionaba a los *rankings* académicos. Se encontraron cuatro diferentes formas de movilización de los rankings en los documentos: cuestionamiento de las universidades por los resultados alcanzados, *benchmarks* para el cambio institucional, disputas interpretativas y alabanza institucional. Los datos muestran la asimilación de los resultados obtenidos en los *rankings* con la calidad y la excelencia académicas. Hubo cuestionamientos sobre los resultados obtenidos y la gobernanza de las instituciones. Se concluye que los *rankings* son referentes en la formación de la opinión de la legislatura paulista lo que lleva a las universidades a informar y responsabilizarse por sus resultados.

Palabras-clave: educación superior; *rankings* académicos; *accountability*; universidades públicas

Instrumentos de *accountability* na educação superior brasileira: A presença dos *rankings* acadêmicos na Comissão Parlamentar de Inquérito de Gestão das Universidades Estaduais de São Paulo

Resumo: Este texto apresenta resultados de pesquisa que teve como objetivo analisar os rankings acadêmicos como instrumentos de responsabilização (*accountability*) das universidades públicas brasileiras. A pesquisa focalizou a análise da mobilização de rankings acadêmicos no âmbito da Comissão Parlamentar de Inquérito (CPI) das Universidades Paulistas, que ocorreu na Assembleia Legislativa do Estado de São Paulo, Brasil, entre 24 de abril e 5 de novembro de 2019. Tratou-se de pesquisa documental, que analisou os áudios e transcrições de todas as 20 reuniões da CPI e o relatório final publicado no Diário Oficial do Estado de São Paulo. Realizou-se análise de conteúdo, selecionando os trechos nos quais rankings acadêmicos foram mencionados. Após categorização evidenciaram-se quatro diferentes formas de mobilização dos rankings nos referidos documentos: inquirição das universidades pelos seus resultados, *benchmarks* para mudança institucional, disputas interpretativas e enaltecimento institucional. Os resultados da pesquisa mostram a assimilação dos resultados obtidos nos rankings com a qualidade e a excelência acadêmicas, gerando questionamentos às posições alcançadas e às formas de governança das instituições. Os rankings têm se tornado referências importantes na formação de opinião do legislativo paulista, o que incita as universidades a se reportarem e serem responsabilizadas pelos seus resultados em tais classificações.

Palavras-clave: educação superior; *rankings* acadêmicos; *accountability*; universidades públicas

Instruments of Accountability in Brazilian Higher Education: Academic Rankings in the Parliamentary Inquiry Commission on the Administration of São Paulo State Universities²

Academic rankings have gained notoriety in the public debate on higher education. Whether via the media, political authorities or universities themselves, rankings have come to inhabit higher education actors' daily lives. Thus, we often find criticism of their methodologies, which sometimes lie far from best practice conventions to measure academic research. Nevertheless, scientific rigor non-observance and biases due to chosen criteria have failed to prevent the proliferation and wide institutionalization of academic rankings in the last decade. The IREG Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence³ currently lists 23 international and 59 Brazilian periodically in force rankings.

A reason for this resilient rise in academic rankings relates to demands for greater transparency and accountability in public life. We live in a time in which auditing principles – verification, monitoring, and accountability – have extrapolated the scope of corporate governance and become guiding values for public and non-governmental institutions (Power, 1999). Higher education has incorporated this auditing culture (materialized in the creation of academic performance metrics), allowing the permanent monitoring of its institutions. Rankings produce such metrics and give them visibility, encouraging institutions to collect data. The institutionalization of academic rankings in higher education was not only due to data production, but also especially for allowing institutions to be held accountable for their performances:

Many national and international studies have analyzed this rise in academic rankings. In Brazil, some studies have found the attention public universities pay to international rankings, mentioning their results in their official documents and institutional journals (Barreyro & Ferreira, 2021; Calderón et al., 2019; Righetti, 2016). Thiengo (2018) points out how rankings influence the design of public policies, reinforcing the model of world-class universities in educational policies. However, while institutional documents and official policies may provide important information on the matter, they also have some limitations. On the one hand, organizations can deviate their practices from their formal structures to conciliate the internal coordination of their activities with external pressures to comply with legitimate values and norms (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). On the other hand, global practices and strategies may dispense with public policy intermediation to locally institutionalize themselves with other transmission channels and social actors capable of operationalizing this process (Levitt & Merry, 2009).

This study shows how rankings have served as public university accountability instruments via a still unexplored actor in research: the legislative power. To this end, we will analyze the meetings held within the Parliamentary Inquiry Commission on the Administration of São Paulo

² This article is based on a research project entitled “Internationalization of higher education: uses and impacts of global academic rankings in Brazilian research universities”, granted by the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (433761/2018-0), and the Ph.D. dissertation “Rankings in Brazil and in the United States: local boundaries of a global experience”, supported by CAPES Foundation and Fulbright Commission.

³ According to official information, IREG is an association of ranking agencies, universities, and other actors interested in academic rankings whose purpose is “strengthening of public awareness and understanding of range of issues related to university rankings and academic excellence” (IREG, 2021a)

State Universities⁴, in the Legislative Assembly of the State of São Paulo⁵ (2019). We deem the São Paulo legislative power an important stakeholder for state universities since it represents civil society interests and has a constitutional duty to investigate facts. Thus, establishing a parliamentary inquiry commission to investigate administrative irregularities in universities in the state of São Paulo constitutes a kind of accountability ritual, making it a privileged locus of analysis of the role rankings play as accountability instruments. Thus, we hope to contribute to the study of educational policies by showing how rankings (even if absent in government guidelines) influence higher education.

This study has three sections, in addition to this introduction and final considerations. The first section briefly describes the history of academic rankings, the conditions of their emergence, and their contemporary developments. Then, we summarize some of the main contributions from the national and international literature on the interactions between higher education institutions and academic rankings, detailing their effects on the governance and public accountability of these institutions. Finally, we analyze mentions of academic rankings in *CPI das Universidades* participants' statements, evaluating how the São Paulo legislative power utilized them regarding the public accountability of those universities. We conclude with some reflections on how the evidence we found allows us to define some paths to understand how academic rankings have affected Brazilian higher education.

A History of Academic Rankings

Indications of embryonic ranking practices in higher education date back to the 19th century, when the U.S. Department of Education first published data from institutions to rank them (Salmi & Soroyan, 2007). Later, in 1902, the American Medical Association published a list of medical schools containing their graduates' approval rate in professional qualification exams. In 1906, it ranked schools into classes according to their approval rates (Usher, 2017). Other ranking practices were conducted in the framework of the then prominent studies on notable people - *Where We Get Our Best Men* (UK - 1900) and *American Men of Science* (USA - 1910). In the public sphere, in 1911, the United States Bureau of Education developed an evaluation system dividing higher education institutions into five strata. However, it generated enormous dissatisfaction in academia, which prevented its publication (Espeland & Sauder, 2016).

Until the 1980s, ranking practices in higher education had a narrow scope in their production and distribution. The prehistory of academic rankings, as named by Usher (2016), showed they were restricted to graduate and professional education, which limited their media and commercial potential (Usher, 2017).

Such potential was evinced only in the second half of the 20th century, when Western higher education experienced a massive growth (Ringel & Werron, 2020). The dissemination of the university experience changed Western culture, proliferating the yearnings surrounding it and catching the attention of popular newspapers and magazines, thus giving rise to the first mass academic rankings and marking the growing scope of their production, circulation, and purposes. In the United States, the first edition of the well-known U.S News & World Report Best Colleges was published in 1983, utilizing reputation surveys as its source of data (Usher, 2017). Countries such as

⁴ Despite its name, it refers only to the state universities: University of São Paulo (USP), University of Campinas (Unicamp), and São Paulo State University (Unesp)

⁵ Parliamentary Inquiry Commission is a legislative investigation of a relevant fact. Its two main tasks are to investigate alleged wrongdoing and propose solutions to it, which should be included in a final report. Although it cannot judge and/or punish, the commission submits its final report to the competent bodies.

Brazil, Chile, Poland, Germany, and Japan also saw the emergence of large-scale academic rankings over the past few decades (Calderón et al., 2014; Usher, 2017).

Higher education rankings became even stronger when international rankings emerged at the beginning of the 21st century. The first of which, the Academic Ranking of World Universities, emerged from a Chinese government initiative to create the C9 League (a kind of Chinese Ivy League) through a commission to benchmark Chinese universities against their global peers, providing data to guide public investment decisions. Named as Project 985, it involved a selective group of research universities, including Shanghai Jiao Tong University, which led the capitalization of benchmarking in a project related: the creation of the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU; Liu & Cheng, 2005; Usher, 2017). The university ranking indicators reflected the interests involved in their creation, with two major measurement focuses: research and concentration of scientific talent (Usher, 2017). This Chinese ranking ignored reputation surveys, popular among media agencies (Safón, 2013).

The global attractiveness of ARWU sparked interest for more comprehensive rankings. The success of the U.S News & World Report Best Colleges ranking revealed the popular appeal of student-oriented rankings, while the rise of globalization and the internationalization on higher education agendas (Altbach & Knight, 2007) paved the way for their dissemination worldwide. Thus, in 2004, the British magazine *Times Higher Education* (THE), in partnership with the educational consultancy agency Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), created its first university ranking – Times Higher Education-QS World University Ranking.

The wide and immediate repercussion of international academic rankings both expanded and differentiated ranking practices. On the one hand, the great repercussion of global rankings stimulated the creation of new national rankings by emulating methods and criteria of their international correspondents, adding some local peculiarity. Of the 59 national rankings registered on the IREG Observatory on Academic and Excellence, 25 first published their results from 2005 onward, when the three main international academic rankings were already in circulation (IREG, 2021b). In Brazil, the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* created its *Ranking Universitário Folha* (Folha University Ranking) in 2012. Its methodology greatly resembles that of QS and THE, adding only a few peculiarities of Brazilian higher education in its criteria, such as students' average score at the National Student Performance Exam (Enade)⁶.

On the other hand, a new wave of international rankings has been consolidated in recent years (Usher, 2017). Both *Times Higher Education* and Quacquarelli Symonds began to produce regional rankings, which would eventually result in small changes in the weight distribution of their indicators to adjust them to the reality of the evaluated region. Other rankings assess alternative aspects to the strict view of academic excellence, such as THE Impact, aimed at assessing the role institutions play toward the United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals, and the UI GreenMetric, which seeks to find the universities most committed to sustainability (*Times Higher Education*, 2021; Greenmetric UI, 2021). Finally, we have witnessed the emergence of initiatives that, in view of the criticisms of the restricted evaluative scope of traditional rankings and their resulting biases, chose to rate universities based on non-hierarchical criteria. These rankings have no aggregated score, such as Leiden Ranking and U-Multirank. The latter markedly resembles benchmarking, comparing institutions based on criteria chosen by users. Both rankings mark a new generation of academic rankings that have sought to allow international comparisons according to ethical bibliometric evaluation principles, arranged in documents such as the Leiden Manifesto and the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (Marcovitch, 2019; Usher, 2017).

⁶ Enade is a large-scale exam applied to students from public and private colleges. Its results compose the National System of Evaluation of Higher Education (Sinaes; Barreyro & Rothen, 2014).

The history of academic rankings shows the national and international liveliness of such ratings in higher education. The capacity of ranking agencies to incorporate some of the criticism addressed to their methods ended up strengthening and corroborating the naturalization of ranking outcomes as a synonym for academic quality⁷. Thus, rather than anchoring the institutionalization of academic rankings in the scientific quality of their measurements, it did so by serving as instruments to guide students' choice into the admission market and monitor higher education institutions (Espeland, 2020; Esposito & Stark, 2019; Wells & Marope, 2013).

Rankings and Public Accountability

The growing relevance of academic rankings in higher education has attracted researchers' attention to understand their origins, methodologies, and effects on the governance of institutions and higher education systems. On the latter, Wells and Marope (2013) highlight how "universities find themselves having to explain to the public their performance on set criteria used by rankers and other quality monitoring bodies" (Wells & Marope, 2013, p. 13). Hazelkorn (2011) stresses academic leaders' concern with how rankings influence stakeholders' preferences, leading institutions to consider such classifications in strategic planning designs, institutional evaluation processes, and the development of marketing strategies, among others.

The student admission market is one of the main mechanisms to institutionalize these rankings as public accountability instruments. Studies such as Stevens (2009), Espeland and Sauder (2016), and Bowman and Bastedo (2009) have stressed how rankings guide students' choice in the admission market and their effect on the organizational dynamics of institutions by making their performances public and widely visible (Bowman & Bastedo, 2009; Griffith & Rask, 2007; Meredith, 2004). Since tuitions constitute an important source of revenue for many American institutions, they explain some of the reasons leading universities to pay attention to rankings, even if they criticize their methodologies (Espeland & Sauder, 2016; Esposito & Stark, 2019). Rankings also guide the choices of those known as international students, who decided to study abroad due to a framework of higher education globalization, which grew after the approval of the General Agreement on Trade in Services, in which rankings mark those known as World-Class Universities, guiding students' preferences (Barreiro, 2018).

Ranking Best Colleges, created by Playboy magazine in 1982, pioneered the use of rankings as an instrument of public accountability in Brazil. The federal government supported the listing via the then president of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (Capes), Cláudio de Moura Castro. The support aimed to foster an evaluative culture in the country since it lacked, at that time, a systematic and periodic evaluation of undergraduate courses, only showing an embryonic evaluation of graduate studies. Then, Castro saw an opportunity to develop an evaluation of higher education in Brazil in Best Colleges, leading him to support the initiative by establishing continuous channels of communication to provide the data the magazine requested (Gonçalves, 2017).

In just over a decade, the federal government has gone from externally encouraging higher education rankings to leading them. Influenced by the neoliberal policy agenda, which greatly rose in the 90's, Fernando Henrique Cardoso's government created the *Exame Nacional de Cursos* (National Course Examination - ENC). Also known as *Provaão*, ENC was a census exam applied to students in the last year of their courses and aimed to measure students' learning outcomes. The publication of

⁷ An illustrative example involves Quacquarelli Symonds adopting, in 2015, Normalized Citation Impact to correct biases from differences in publication patterns between areas of knowledge (Selten et al., 2020). For an overview of the ranking criteria used in academic rankings, see Vernon, Balas & Momani (2018).

Provão results sought to allow society to control the quality of course offers by guiding consumers' preferences in the market. Inspired by the U.S. model, it hoped to foster a kind of higher education self-regulation with a decentralized public accountability system that would optimize the general quality of institutions (Almeida et al., 1996, p.167).

In 2004, the change in government in the previous year (which brought Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva to power) sanctioned the National System of Evaluation of Higher Education (Sinaes). This system stems from a critical perspective of *Provão*, seeking to rescue the federal responsibility of regulating the quality of higher education institutions and courses. Students' performance evaluation remained, now called the National Student Performance Exam (Enade), but without its past leading role and purposes. On the one hand, Enade was only a part of Sinaes, including institutional evaluations (self- and external assessments) and courses evaluations (on site by specialists). On the other hand, Enade was a sample exam, applied to students from the first and last years of the course to evaluate their learning. At first, Sinaes represented the discontinuity of the public accountability mechanism via rankings (Barreyro, 2008).

In 2008, Sinaes underwent changes to speed up its processes. For this, two higher education quality indicators were created: the *Conceito Preliminar de Cursos* (Preliminary Course Concept – CPC) and the *Índice Geral de Cursos da Instituição* (General Institution Course Index – IGC). CPC consists of Enade average scores⁸, faculty data and students' perceptions, measured by a survey. IGC includes CPC average grades over the past three years and the graduate programs national assessment scores adjusted by enrollment distribution by education level. The development of these indicators decreased specialists' visits, which would be conducted only in courses that failed to reach the minimum CPC score. In the year such reforms were implemented, the Brazilian Ministry of Education published a ranking with institution and course results. Although the practice was discontinued after the negative reaction of the academic community, the federal initiative evinced the resurgence of rankings as mechanisms to hold higher education accountable (Barreyro & Rothen, 2014).

This type of market-oriented accountability targets demand-sensitive sectors, in which institutions need to maintain certain enrollment to financially survive. Brazilian private higher education institutions are much more sensitive to this type of accountability since their main source of revenue comes from direct or subsidized monthly fees. Although the cost of public institutions also relates to enrollment, this is relatively stable in such institutions, which have a much greater demand than vacancies. However, although Brazilian public universities are not inserted in an admission market, they have reported and justified their results in rankings, incorporating them into their institutional development plans (Thiengo et al., 2018).

Globally, Hazelkorn (2011) found that one of the main concerns of academic authorities is that global rankings guide their stakeholders' preferences. Whether because government investment decisions can consider (including implicitly) the reputation of their universities or by improving relations with companies, academic leaders have considered rankings and their placement in them (Hazelkorn, 2011). Also, rankings have been influential in higher education policymaking, evinced by

⁸ CPC includes a value-added metric to measure the additional contribution of educational institutions to student learning. Named the Difference Indicator between Observed and Expected Performance (IDD), IDD utilizes multilevel analysis to model students' performance at ENADE as a function of their scores in the National High School Exam (ENEM) (Haar, 2021).

recent French (*Opération Campus*⁹ and the *Initiatives d'excellence*) and Danish experiences¹⁰ (Boudard & Westerheijden, 2017; Wright, 2018).

The cases mentioned reflect different dimensions of how rankings serve as accountability instruments. Although uncommonly used as formal instruments of institutional accountability, academic rankings create a space wherein universities are under permanent scrutiny. This new regime of visibility of universities forms their stakeholders' expectations and preferences. Thus, we can define rankings as unofficial accountability systems that act indirectly on institutions since they form stakeholders' preferences (Espeland & Sauder, 2016; Esposito & Stark, 2019).

In the absence of an admission market in Brazil, what would then be the channels to institutionalize rankings as instruments to hold Brazilian public universities accountable? Since academic rankings act as higher education accountability instruments, the following section aims to assess the extent to which they played this role during the meetings of the Parliamentary Inquiry Commission on the Administration of São Paulo State Universities (*CPI das Universidades*)¹¹, created to subject the administrations of São Paulo state universities to the scrutiny of its legislature.

Rankings at *CPI das Universidades*

The Parliamentary Inquiry Commission on the Administration of São Paulo State Universities (*CPI das Universidades*) was constituted, according to its final report, to “investigate irregularities in the administration of public universities in the state, especially regarding their use of public funds” (Estado de São Paulo, 2019, p. 1). Application 284/2019 proposed the creation of a Parliamentary Inquiry Commission, justifying it by the press dissemination of alleged financial irregularities, even considering the financial crisis universities faced (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado de São Paulo, 2019a). It also stresses the relevance of the almost 10% of the Tax on Goods and Services transferred to public universities, who can autonomously manage these resources, as provided for by law.¹² Thus, Application 284/2019 stems from complaints of alleged financial irregularities, especially the irregular daily and salary payments above that permitted, to scrutinize the autonomous financial management of São Paulo state universities.

Despite the mistrust and discontent of some academic sectors (Fórum das Seis, 2019a; Universidade de São Paulo, 2019), *CPI das Universidades* was approved and established on April 24, 2019, via Act 32/2019¹³. Over 180 days, 20 meetings were held, of which 11 had hearings with members of universities or related bodies, either as a summoned or invited¹⁴.

⁹ In view of the poor results of French institutions at ARWU, resources were spent to renovate the infrastructure of several institutions (*Opération Campus*) and encourage the international competitiveness of universities, “attracting the best researchers, teachers and students” (Boudard & Westerheijden, 2017, p. 166).

¹⁰ The Danish Ministry of Education has set up a Globalization Council to develop a strategy to establish Global Top Level Universities in the country.

¹¹ Translation note: we have maintained the original acronym and reduced name as this kind of legislative investigation is not familiar to American politics and legal systems.

¹² São Paulo state universities have a unique financing mechanism compared their national counterparts. Their state appropriations are based on a fixed percentage of the state excise tax, granting them financial autonomy (São Paulo, 1989). This percentage is currently at 9.57%.

¹³ President: Wellington Moura (Republicanos), Vice President: Carla Morando (PSDB). Other effective members: Valéria Bolsonaro (PSL), Professor Bebel (PT), Barros Munhoz (PSB), Arthur do Val (DEM), Daniel José (NOVO), Professor Kenny (PP), and Leci Brandão (PC do B). Their substitutes: Douglas Garcia (PSL), Paulo Fiorilo (PT), Caio França (PSB), Marcos Zerbini (PSDB), Rogério Nogueira (DEM), Sebastião Santos (Republicanos), Sérgio Victor (NOVO), and Delegado Olim (PP).

¹⁴ For more details, see <https://www.al.sp.gov.br/comissao/comissoes-parlamentares-de-inquerito/>

Its final report, published in the Legislative Official Journal, includes four sub-rapporteurs: i) Research, Costs, Travel, Daily Wages, and Performance: Investment, Results, and proof of investment (deputy sub-rapporteur Carla Morando); ii) Transparency and performance: Enforcement of the Law on transparency of access to public data (deputy rapporteur Professor Kenny); iii) Governance, Administration and Performance: Salaries above that maximum permitted (deputy rapporteur Valéria Bolsonaro); iv) Contracts, Consortia, and performance: Review of legality, control of expenses, and provision of services (deputy rapporteur Daniel José)¹⁵. Over the course of 67 pages, each sub-report indicates alleged administrative irregularities and poor administration practices by São Paulo state universities. It also has a recommendation and suggestion section that includes from the creation of Compliance Superintendencies in universities to hardening disciplinary regulations against students, teachers, and employees' vandalism and depredation to the detriment of university assets (São Paulo, 2019).

After six months, the report approved merely had “indications of irregularities, omissions, and inadequate use of public money in the administrative and financial management of São Paulo state universities” (São Paulo, 2019, p. 66), evincing neither crime of responsibility nor any other administrative offense. The end of the text recommended referring all the collected evidence to the Secretary of State for Economic Development, Public Prosecutor's Office of the State of São Paulo, Federal Revenue Secretariat, State Court of Auditors, and the State Governor (São Paulo, 2019) for proper analysis and possible investigation.

CPI das Universidades had significant repercussions in the press. Traditional newspapers in São Paulo, such as *Folha de São Paulo* and *Estado de São Paulo*, followed its discussions throughout its 180 days. In its article *Reitores Sensatos* (Sensible Rectors), *Estado de São Paulo* highlighted the non-combative strategy universities adopted, taking that opportunity to explain and disseminate its initiatives and commitment to academic excellence (O Estado de São Paulo, 2019)¹⁶. Months later, the newspaper criticized *CPI das Universidades* for having failed to significantly advance its investigations, merely reinforcing what control bodies had already pointed out (Kruise, 2020).

Folha de São Paulo disseminated individual and collective positions on the theme. In an interview, Former Senator Aloysio Nunes' (PSDB) classifies *CPI das Universidades* as “an embarrassing spectacle of truculence and ignorance,” the result of an “ideological war” led by the then Minister of Education, Abraham Weintraub (Bächtold & Marques, 2019, p.3). After the commission ended, the rectors of the three universities investigated published an article in *Folha de São Paulo* in which they reflected upon the investigation, adopting the same strategy we mentioned above. At the time, the rectors stated that, despite the tensions inherent to the investigation, all three universities could take advantage of public attention to explain their procedures and reinforce their commitment to academic excellence. The authors suggested other reasons for creating the commission, stating that a clear and transparent dialogue with the political class and society is an important instrument to combat the “forces of backwardness and obscurantism in their crusade against what is at the heart of public institutions such as São Paulo State universities: critical thinking, academic freedom, appreciation of diversity, and respect for differences” (Knobel et al., 2020).

Professor, Student, and Staff Associations in the three universities also disseminated these discussions, showing concern about possible attacks to university autonomy and the privatizing tone of its recommendations and suggestions (Fórum das Seis, 2019b). Moreover, the committee would

¹⁵ Deputy Bebel (PT) voted separately due to her disagreement with the final CPI report.

¹⁶ Articles from *Jornal da USP* evinced this strategy, prioritizing the dissemination of information to the detriment of a combative position in the face of the CPI (Cruz, 2019; Son, 2019; Mazzitelli, 2019).

have ignored the debate on university financing conditions, which would be at the very heart of the financial crisis they faced¹⁷.

Methodological Procedures

This study uses a documentary research approach to analyze the transcripts of 20 committee meetings and the final report published in the São Paulo State Official Journal. All materials are available on the website of the São Paulo State Legislative Assembly.

Data collection consisted of searching for keywords¹⁸ in these documents. All excerpts containing such mentions were chosen. Then, meetings referring to each highlighted excerpt were fully read and their authors and dates, identified. These readings showed indirect references¹⁹ to rankings, which varied in meaning, generating then a search for other keywords that helped us identify excerpts containing direct and indirect references to academic rankings²⁰. Finally, participants' tone was found to be relevant to understand some nuances in the texts, motivating us to listen to meetings which mentioned academic rankings.

After data treatment, coding was performed in two cycles, as suggested by Saldaña (2021). The first inductive and exploratory cycle elaborated descriptive categories to assess the different uses of academic rankings in the committee meetings (Hsieh & Shannon, 2018; Saldaña, 2021). In total, nine different uses of rankings were found, distinct in purpose and context: i) performance survey; ii) propositional questioning; iii) praise; iv) negative reaction; v) institutional praise; vi) justification; vii) caveat; viii) argumentative support; and iv) interpretative disputes.

In the second cycle, we moved from empirical descriptive to theoretical analytical coding, investigating convergence patterns among first-cycle categories, appraising them in terms of theoretical relevance (Saldaña, 2021). Thus, we found four different forms of mobilizing academic rankings. First, they were used to directly question universities on their placements. Second, changes in the governance of São Paulo universities were suggested, taking well-ranked universities as a quality parameter. Third, parliamentarians from different parties and ideological positions utilized rankings to both praise and criticize universities. Finally, the spontaneous mention of academic rankings by one of the institutional authorities heard in the committee was observed.

Academic Rankings at CPI das Universidades

Although *CPI das Universidades* aimed to investigate alleged administrative irregularities, the meetings constituted a ceremonial moment of university public accountability. Whether by its members or representatives' attitude, it became a space for inquiries and accusations that extrapolated their original scope, including issues related to financing, governance, and academic performance models. In this sense, several indicators were naturalized as legitimate measures to evaluate the quality of universities, which involved actors strategically utilized both to criticize and to reinforce the excellence of the investigated institutions.

Academic rankings had remarkable importance in both cases, especially in parliamentarians' discourse. This suggests the hypothesis that academic rankings constituted instruments to publicly

¹⁷ Except for Mrs Bebel, who, in her separate vote devoted a significant part of her text to problematize the conditions of university public funding (Estado de São Paulo, 2019).

¹⁸ The following keywords were used: *ranking*, *Times*, *THE*, *Shanghai*, *ARWU*, *QS*, *RUF*, and *Folha*.

¹⁹ The following keywords were used: *top*, *colocação*, *classificação*, *classificações*, *melhor*, *lugar*, *posição*.

²⁰ Another reason to broaden the scope of the used keywords was the observation of typing errors, especially regarding acronyms and foreign terms.

hold universities accountable, being somehow institutionalized as a legitimate evaluation and classification of higher education institutions.

Questioning Universities on their Ranking Positions

Parliamentarians and a guest utilized several academic rankings to question the academic performance of São Paulo state universities. Except for deputy Daniel José (NOVO), other parliamentarians avoided detailing the performance of universities in each evaluated criterion, only mentioning their position in them. Daniel José was the only one to more specifically use rankings to question the academic performance of universities. During the hearing of USP rector, Vahan Agopyan, Daniel José asked why the university showed such a discrepant performance regarding the quantity and quality of the studies it published under CWTS Leiden:

In the first topic of academic excellence, you mentioned the number of studies USP conducts. Among the 1,000 best universities in the world, it ranks eighth according to the University of Leiden. However, their quality is poor. When we parameterized (sic) by the amount of research among the 10% most cited in their respective areas, USP falls from eighth to 780th among the best 1,000 universities in the world (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado de São Paulo, 2019b, p. 51).

The committee members showed no predilection for any specific ranking. Different positions were attributed to the universities, mentioning several international academic rankings, most often those of *Times Higher Education*, Quacquarelli Symonds, and Leiden University. Rankings, if differentiated, were so only by name, without further details about their criteria and methods. In some moments, it remained unclear which ranking the committee members mentioned. During the hearing of Unesp rector, Sandro Valentini, state deputy Arthur do Val (PODEMOS) contrasted the academic performances and budgets of Université Sorbonne and Unesp, generically referring to international rankings²¹.

Unesp has a budget of about R\$ 2.86 billion. This is higher than the renowned Sorbonne University in France. While the first figures in the top 10 or 20 positions in education rankings worldwide, Unesp only appears at an international ranking at the 166th position. I would like to know if this can be considered as some kind of inefficiency at Unesp? (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado de São Paulo, 2019c, p. 27–28).

Another inquiry modality to universities involved criticizing ranking drops. With the same generic tone adopted by the deputy Arthur do Val, the director-general of the Court of Auditors of the State of São Paulo (TCE-SP), Sergio Siqueira Rossi, lamented São Paulo universities allegedly dropping in international rankings. During his turn, Rossi pointed out a series of problems and inconsistencies in the financial management of São Paulo state universities, stressing that TCE-SP successively rejected their accounts²². Despite these issues, Rossi ended his statement claiming that the drop in international rankings was a great reason for sadness for São Paulo society.

²¹ We did not find any academic ranking which was consistent with the deputy's discourse.

²² TCE-SP had already used academic rankings as a parameter of academic performance. In 2016, the Court rejected the accounts of the University of São Paulo, reporting its placement drop in several international rankings and how it justified it. The text also includes recommendations from the Public Prosecutor's Office

This is the great backdrop of universities, I will not go into other details here, such as buying properties that were unnecessary (which lie there paralyzed), works that were started and not completed, not by negligence but due to lack of resources, because all resources; the vast majority of resources were consumed by personnel expenditure. I will not even enter into these aspects effectively, as I said, high staff expenditure, growing budget deficit, lack of resources to complete some projects, and, worst of all, regrettably, the drop in university ranking on the world stage. This fills us with sadness, as we consider that all our universities are an invaluable asset to the knowledge and wisdom of our people. (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado de São Paulo, 2019d, p. 12, our emphasis)

These three passages show different uses of rankings to survey universities on their academic performances. In the first case, specific ranking criteria were used to question USP results. The ranking mentioned - CTWS Leiden - requires this type of user posture since it contains no aggregated quality score to compare universities. Thus, although every ranking virtually involves a comparison among the ranked entities, the choice of a specific criterion emphasizes the performance of USP compared to the other institutions ranked. In short, Daniel José uses a specific classification to make a general comparison. This approach differs from that by deputy Arthur do Val, who question the efficiency of Unesp, i.e., its results in relation to its annual budget. Unlike deputy Daniel José, Arthur do Val uses a generic classification to make a specific comparison between UNESP and Université Sorbonne. Finally, rankings were used to not only compare universities, but also to compare the institutions to themselves. The emphasis Sergio Rossi places on ranking drop²³ shows the use of rankings to monitor academic performance over time.

Compare to Transform: Rankings as Benchmarks

As per the previous section, specific ranking criteria have served to broadly question universities. We found a certain reverse movement during the committee meetings, i.e., rankings being used to question specific aspects of universities. In this case, initiatives came almost exclusively from deputy Daniel José. He resorted several times to academic rankings as a kind of benchmark from which it would be possible to see that São Paulo state universities would have failed to comply with the best practices adopted by the best ranked universities.

Finally, a point I think is quite relevant, is that of governance, and it has been little explored during our conversations here, in our meetings, because today, in Brazil, much of the selection and structuring of university governance is very much based, in the end, on political incentives and is scarcely technical, whereas, if you look at the top 50 universities in the world, they all have a small board, a board with a lot of external participation that seeks to form a ranking, an active selection, an active search for the people who will be their next presidents, by the people who will be the

(MPU-SP) for the inspection sector to “monitor the qualification of USP, in the coming years, until its original position is reached again” (Tribunal de Contas do Estado de São Paulo, 2016, p. 96).

²³ Due to z-score normalization, university scores show normal distribution. Thus, this variation of positions over time by universities lying closer to the median is to be expected since score differences between institutions are minimal. In these cases, position variations especially fail to represent significant changes in their quality standards, even within the criteria measured by these rankings. Nevertheless, the press has systematically ignored these technical details while reporting these results, giving the impression that universities have experienced real quality drops.

next leaders of the universities. And not here, here we have internal elections and everything. Do you think there is room for some improvement, even partial, incremental, so that state universities and Unicamp also approach the reality of today's best universities in the world? (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado de São Paulo, 2019e, p. 76)

Note that rankings are taken not only as a legitimate metric to compare universities, but also as benchmarks that reveal practices and structures universities should universally adopt. In some other moments, this attitude toward rankings was even more directly and explicitly manifested, mentioning ranking success cases and their supposed reasons:

I would like to know more about partnerships with the private sector, which are also low in Brazil. Examples such as that of Boston University, which went from 52nd to 35th best university in the world... it achieved this result greatly due to the partnerships it made with the private sector seeking not only other sources of revenue, but also incorporating more practical activities into its curriculum and promoting an interaction between students and professionals who already have extensive experience in their respective sectors. Therefore, in addition to being an important stimulus for research, it solves real problems. I would like to know: what are the public-private partnership plans for USP? (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado de São Paulo, 2019b, p. 53)

Both statements mobilize academic rankings to inquire authorities about the university model adopted in the investigated institutions. They propose an apparent link between university governance and academic rankings, although without mentioning which university governance elements would impact indicators rankings and why. This type of linking turns rankings into a benchmarking that closely relates evaluations to the government of conducts (Bruno, 2009; Sauder & Espeland, 2009). These examples seem to legitimize legislators' ideas on the model of higher education they defend.

Rankings on Demand: Interpretative Disputes

Although rankings are simple and intelligible forms of quantification, the interpretation of their results is still susceptible to controversies and disagreements. The combination of simplicity with the pretentiousness of their purposes (defining the quality of universities by a number), makes the interpretation of rankings subject to disputes. The committee showed this dynamic during discussions between Representatives Barros Munhoz (Partido Socialista Brasileiro - PSB) and Daniel José. Troubled by deputy Daniel José's frequent allusions to higher education in the United States, deputy Barros countered this ranking-based criticism with more rankings, but based on a different interpretative bias.

[...] their model [Daniel José] is the United States. You should move there, go there, go very close to Canada, which is 45 degrees below zero, maybe freezing a little would improve your head. Go there, understand? So, here's the thing, folks: you know how many universities there are in the world, Mr. President? 25 thousand. Do you know, in this scenario, where USP is placed? 101st; where is Unesp, where is Unicamp? 100th something. So, there are 1,000 that are cataloged, accredited; of these 1,000, 90% are behind USP, 750 are behind Unicamp and Unesp. So that's not much? Is it really not much? (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado de São Paulo, 2019f, p. 67–68)

The discussion continues with both parties having difficulty in creating mutual understanding on which ranking would be legitimate or how to interpret their results. This interpretative dispute also focused on international academic rankings, evinced by deputies' little appreciation for the only national academic ranking – the Folha University Ranking – at least of regarding its pertinence to evaluate São Paulo state universities.

Mr. DANIEL JOSÉ – NOVO - Placing here the “Folha” Ranking, which has number of publications as its main criterion, and mentioning this as a criterion for this institution to be the best, or not, is a lack of creativity, is a lack of reference.

Mr. BARROS MUNHOZ - PSB - This is not “Folha de S.Paulo,” but international measurements.

Mr. DANIEL JOSÉ - NOVO - Oh, so USP is the best in the world

Mr. BARROS MUNHOZ - PSB - No, it's the 101st.

Mr. DANIEL JOSÉ - NOVO - 101st in the world in which ranking?

Mr. BARROS MUNHOZ - PSB - There are three here.

Mr. DANIEL JOSÉ - NOVO - Times Higher Education? QS?

Mr. BARROS MUNHOZ - PSB - Only yours count?

Mr. DANIEL JOSÉ - NEW - No, I'm using the ones which are, in fact, respectable.

(Assembleia Legislativa do Estado de São Paulo, 2019f, p. 70–71)

In the final committee report, deputy. Bebel (PT) utilized another form to interpret ranking results. Voting separately since she disagreed with rapporteur Valéria Bolsonaro's conclusions, Mrs. Bebel highlighted the prestigious results by Brazilian public universities in specific areas, in accordance with Santos (2015), who argue that Brazilian universities have a better performance in academic rankings by knowledge area.

A section she attached to the final report focuses exclusively on the results of São Paulo state universities in the three main international academic rankings – ARWU, THE, and QS.

By analyzing São Paulo university rankings, we found that, in the 2017 edition of ARWU-GRAS, Unicamp (6th) and USP (7th) constituted the best placed Brazilian universities, ranked among the “Top 10” in the world in food science and technology. In addition to its outstanding performance, USP ranked among the top 50 in the world in three other areas: 9th in dentistry, 12th in agriculture, 39th in biotechnology. Unesp reached 40th in agriculture and dentistry and 41st in veterinary medicine. Unicamp, in addition to its prominent position in food science and technology, also placed 44th in dentistry. (Estado de São Paulo, 2019, p. 196)

Whether for criticism or praise, academic rankings often figure as evidence of the quality of universities. Parliamentarians seemed to agree on the legitimacy of rankings as a form to assess higher education institutions, only debating the several ways of interpreting them.

Rankings as Instruments of Institutional Praise

The hearings with the rectors of the three investigated universities granted them a set time to overview their universities, a procedure adopted in other committee hearings. Taking the opportunity to explain their procedures and disseminate their results, all rectors used their time to praise the academic excellence of their institutions and indicate the present and future challenges threatening the long-term support of such excellence. In this context, all presentations mentioned academic rankings, as the following excerpts show:

[...] USP manages to maintain quality despite its size. Scientific production in all the areas have had an impact above the world average since 2014. In national and international classifications, USP is usually pointed out as the best in the country, often the best in Latin America and even Ibero-America. (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado de São Paulo, 2019b, p. 5)

Then, regarding excellence, we are among the top five in Brazil, considering young universities since rankings rate those aged below 50 in a different way. So, we are happy to be freed from Unicamp and USP, which have existed for more than 50 years. So, we have, even among those in BRICS... Unesp is the third in Brazil, not only of ours. Shanghai, we are tied with Unicamp and Federal do Rio de Janeiro. Yesterday the top ten came out, Unesp finally entered the top ten in Latin America. Of course, Unicamp and USP are also ranked there. Excellent. (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado de São Paulo, 2019c, p. 18)

So, today we have an effective and very important participation among the best universities in Latin America, [Unicamp] is very well ranked, among the best in the world as well. (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado de São Paulo, 2019e, p. 4)

We found that emphasis on international rankings varied between presentations. While the Unicamp and USP rectors only generically referred to academic rankings, placing little emphasis on the results of their universities in different rankings, the Unesp rector adopted an inverse stance, explaining and celebrating the rise of his university.

The Unicamp and USP rectors opted to place little emphasis to international rankings during their presentations, in line with their positions during the meetings. When asked by deputy Daniel José about strategies to improve the position of USP in academic rankings, rector Vahan Agopyan argued that his commitment as rector is not raising the university position in rankings even if he recognized the importance of external evaluations. His conciliatory stance agrees with some of the literature on academic rankings, which postulates that, despite its methodological weaknesses, rankings are here to stay, and should be critically assimilated (Altbach, 2006; Hazelkorn, 2011).

First, deputy, I, as a rector... my dream is not for Universidade de São Paulo to necessarily be at the top. My dream is for you, ladies and gentlemen and the São Paulo and Brazilian society to take pride and satisfaction that Universidade de São Paulo is doing a good job and meeting the yearnings of Brazil. But I think external evaluations are essential and, therefore, I give a lot of importance to them. I personally went to a Times Higher Education event, the head of the institutional research office went to a QS (sic) event in Europe, because we want to understand what is happening, the guidelines which are being adopted, and see if they fit or not a Brazilian university. (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado de São Paulo, 2019b, p. 51–52)

Another strategy to weigh the relative importance of rankings was using other academic performance metrics, including official assessments, such as Capes National Evaluation of Graduate Programs. Rector Marcelo Knobel's presentation highlighted the exceptional performance of Unicamp's graduate education, "the university in the country with the best weighted average in graduate education regarding its programs" (Legislative Assembly of the State of São Paulo, 2019e,

p. 7). Later, when asked about the possibility of prioritizing resources for areas of excellence toward international competitiveness, Knobel relativized the evaluative potential of academic rankings:

You have several ranking types, which have... they are quite debatable regarding what they offer, i.e., reducing the complexity of a university to a single number is always quite difficult, so there is even this diversity in different rankings because each uses distinct criteria and such. (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado de São Paulo, 2019e, p. 72)

Thus, the investigated universities utilized rankings as a form of institutional praise, even though two of the three rectors made some reservations about the pursuit of higher rankings. This moderate stance between euphoric adoption and categorical rejection suggests some relevance of the rankings for Brazilian higher education: despite their methodological weaknesses and the limited institutional learning triggered by such classifications, they have become a taken-for-granted quality assessment with which higher education actors must deal with.

The Role of Rankings in the Pursuit of Social Legitimacy

The previous section offered four ways in which academic rankings were used in participants' discourses at *CPI das Universidades*. The detailed description of the references to rankings and their contexts allows us, then, to find some intersections among these ways, revealing some aspects of academic rankings as instruments of public accountability. We must stress at least four such aspects: inaccurate references, *post-hoc* causality, ceremonial attitude, and global projection.

Firstly, we found several imprecise references to rankings which failed to duly specify rankings and their publication date. This suggests a certain legitimacy of rankings to classify universities, i.e., despite who produces them and how, rankings would show an intrinsic value. The combination of the simplicity of their form of representation and the pretentiousness of their evaluative scope renders rankings as seductive as subjected to discursive manipulation (Merry, 2016). Thus, generic mentions unsurprisingly coincided with varied interpretations since what indicators evaluate seemed to be less important than the possibility of strengthening a political agenda.

Secondly, the rare mentions to rankings and their criteria followed allegations on the link between institutional aspects and positions in academic rankings. Whether by criticizing university governance or praising practices adopted in foreign universities, we observed implicit links between academic rankings and institutional characteristics, a typical case of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. This Latin refers to an argumentative fallacy establishing a causal relation between phenomena only by their temporal succession, rather than showing clear links between them (Blackburn, 2008). Its use corroborates the notion that the use of rankings at *CPI das Universidades* has tended to conforming and legitimizing ideas, rather than transforming them. On the other hand, the successive references to the governance structures of the best-ranked universities suggest an understanding of academic rankings as an instrument for revealing best practices, driving forces of institutional isomorphism (Marini, 2021; Wedlin, 2007).

Thirdly, the presence of rankings in rectors' initial statements indicates their relevance in the communication between universities and the external community. Faced with the need to inform society about the activities their universities develop, restating their public commitment to academic excellence and inclusion, all rectors mentioned the good positions achieved by São Paulo state universities in rankings. On the other hand, the Unicamp and USP rectors relativized the importance of academic rankings to evaluate universities. This apparent contradiction is, on the contrary, consistent with a ceremonial use of these rankings, i.e., to use socially validated forms of evaluation

to claim the legitimacy of their institutions, even if these criteria express neither the missions of their universities nor the effective quality of their activities. Rectors' stance would thus corroborate the argument that rankings are here to stay, and universities must inevitably deal with them (Altbach, 2006).

Finally, we emphasize the predominance of global academic rankings to over the only national ranking, the *Ranking Universitário da Folha*. During their discussion, deputies Barros Munhoz and Daniel José even questioned the legitimacy of it. Moreover, most of generic mentions to academic rankings²⁴ had an international orientation. In addition to *Ranking Universitário*, the National System Higher Education Evaluation (Sinaes) and one of its instruments, the National Student Performance Exam (Enade), were ignored²⁵. Capes evaluation of graduate studies was mentioned on one occasion, in which the rector of Unicamp stressed the prestigious position of his institution. Thus, national leading positions seems to be insufficient to guarantee the legitimacy of Brazilian public universities, which are increasingly tied to global definitions of academic excellence.

These four aspects suggest that the use of academic rankings during *CPI das Universidades* occurred mainly on a ceremonial basis. Parliamentarians utilized ranking results to give authority to their political agendas for higher education. University leaders showed these results with other academic performance metrics as evidence of the commitment of their institutions to academic excellence. Thus, we found that the committee participants used rankings as rhetorical devices to legitimize their discourse. Just as rankings can function as seals of academic excellence for universities, they also serve to circumvent the validity of social actors' claims (Wedlin, 2011).

Concluding Remarks

This study aimed to investigate the institutionalization of academic rankings as instruments to hold public universities accountable by analyzing how they were used by social actors during *CPI das Universidades*. Given the non-observance of institutional conditions in Brazilian higher education that have historically established academic rankings as accountability instruments in other countries, the reasons that led universities to regularly express their performances according to academic rankings are intriguing.

This question led us to investigate how influence academic rankings are to other external stakeholders, more specifically, the Legislative Assembly of the State of São Paulo and the Court of Auditors of the State of São Paulo. In this case, *CPI das Universidades* was a privileged locus to develop our research: a kind of ceremonial moment of public accountability, in which universities leaders received an invitation to explain possible administrative irregularities and justify the use of resources provided by the São Paulo society.

The mere mention of academic rankings during the meetings would already be a relevant fact given the context of its enunciation. What we observed, however, was even more significant: the systematic presence of such rankings (and their results) in the discourse and debates occurred. Analyzing the different uses of rankings in its participants' discourse evinced a restatement of preconceived ideas rather than the formation of stakeholder opinions. We have no intention of denying the possibility of rankings raising significant institutional changes but of stressing another relevant aspect to understand its institutionalization instead: the use of rankings as a rhetorical device.

²⁴ A pattern repeatedly found in generic mentions of rankings was the use of the qualifier "in the world" after the term "among the best universities."

²⁵ Sinaes is not mandatory for state universities. Currently, Unicamp and Unesp participate in it, whereas USP does not.

Results suggest the importance of refraining against the fever of higher education rankings. Effusive celebrations in the face of positive results may give them a degree of authority incompatible with the nature of their evaluations. Due to their interpretative manipulability, rankings may not a good instrument to improve university-society interactions. If good placements are celebrated as a result of institutional efforts, how do we explain that ranking oscillations are natural and not always reflect quality losses?

Finally, we must recognize the limitations of the object of this research – *CPI das Universidades* – not only because it is restricted to the state universities in São Paulo, but also because it is an atypical phenomenon in the history of Brazilian higher education. However, similar cases can be observed at the federal level in which federal universities are criticized for their rankings. Thus, our analyses may contribute to the Brazilian debate on the place of academic rankings to evaluate the quality of higher education institutions. Moreover, we hope to collaborate with the international literature by showing the Brazilian particular links between higher education rankings and accountability.

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