

## **THE QUEST FOR A WORLD CLASS UNIVERSITY: DEFINING THE GOAL FOR AN EMERGING ECONOMY**

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In the past ten to fifteen years policy makers, scholars, development advisers, industry chief executives and academic leaders have all been grappling with how to create, develop and maintain a university that is recognised as one of the best in the world. Motivations for this pursuit revolve around increasing economic competitiveness and diversity, being part of the global scientific community, national prestige or pride and talent creation and retention. The development of national and global ranking schemes has added a semblance of objectivity to assessing institutional performance and fostered an "interest in the performance of the top 100 universities and in creating pathways to a 'world class university'" (Hazelkorn 2014,248-249).

This quest for greatness, like the traditional Knightly quests, has its challenges. The most immediate problem is what to look for, how to define the goal. Like most normative tasks, setting public policy standards is heavily influenced by context. And as Wildavsky observed 40 years ago normative theories "must actually guide the making of governmental decisions" if they are to be more than academic exercises (1992,183.)

As will be apparent in this brief survey much of the scholarship and government action about world class universities is heavily influenced by models and practices in developed economies.

Well established universities can serve as benchmarks or lodestars for aspirant institutions but emulating Cambridge or Harvard is not a formula for more guidance is needed for success. A clearly defined goal and a framework of policies and processes are more likely to form an "enabling environment" which will produce a good university that is "sustained and effective" (Thindwa 2001).

### **Defining "World Class University"**

There is no shortage of attempts to establish a goal of creating a world class university and there is considerable variation between definitions. The first obvious difference is in the naming of the goal.

Some refer to "flagship universities" (Bunting, Cloote & Schalkwyk, 2014; Douglas, 2014, & Yonezawa, 2007), others use the term internationally recognised research universities (Mohrman, Ma & Baker, 2008; Levin, 2010; Saaid,2014, & Rosovsky, 2014), while Simon Marginson (2012) uses "super brands" to refer to the top six universities in the Times Higher Education rankings. The majority use "world class university" (Atlbach 2005; Altbach & Balan 2007; Shattock 2003 & 2010; Krishnan 2005; Deem, Mook & Lucas 2008; Ngok & Guo 2008; Salmi 2009; Shin 2009; Rhee 2011; Yang & Welch 2012).

While there are real differences and shades of meaning and nuance in the choice of term the shared core of meaning of all these variants is "a university commonly held to be one of the best in the world". In doing so they cede legitimacy to those, like Baty and Morse the current architects of the Times Higher and the US News and World Report's rankings, who see reputation as a major element in the chosen term.

The next most obvious difference is in the stated principal purposes of world class universities. Politicians and national policy makers have tended to offer broad aspirational statements. For example Jiang Zemin, as premier of China, wanted to invest in building first-class universities which would "train high-level creative talent, turn out high-standard, original research results and make outstanding contributions to society". (Ngok & Guo 2008, 548). The German federal government's excellence initiative emphasised the importance of research as the dominant benchmark of an institution's reputation (Kehm 2006 & 2009). Similarly the Korean Government's three world class university funding programmes have concentrated on providing additional

resources for research (Byunjon, & Kim 2013; Shin, 2009). Japan's attempts to develop world class universities have also prioritised research (Yonezawa, 2007).

While teaching is often lauded as an element of a great university it is seldom, if ever, cited as the primary goal of a world-class university initiative. Despite the relatively narrow focus set for many world class universities most definitions of what makes a great university tend to be broad. Some like Salmi (2009) offer a small number of generalities: "high concentration of talent", "abundant resources" and operating environment that encourages "innovation" and managerial independence. These are some "generic but informative traits" (Douglas 2014,4) but they offer little guidance to institutional leaders other than hire well and raise money; advice that might be given to the leaders of a start-up enterprise in any field.

Those who study the management and operation of higher education institutions tend to be more granular. They specify principles and processes that distinguish outstanding organisations. These can be lengthy checklists of fifteen to twenty items ranging from financial diversity (Alden and Linn 2004) to institutional research capacity (Douglas 2014,19). Or they can be sets of principles or axioms embedded in national models like Japan's Imperial universities (Yonezawa 2007) or the research university of the USA. Rosovsky (2014), the Harvard dean emeritus and scholar, sets out six elements for a top research university:

- Shared governance with a collegial administrative style
- Academic freedom
- Merit selection of students and faculty
- Significant human contact - "real as opposed to virtual encounters between student and teachers" (5)
- Preservation and transmission of culture as one of its missions; and
- Non-profit status (6)

By his own admission, Rosovsky's list is shaped by "American exceptionalism" and the history of the public research universities. It is also shaped by contemporaneous concerns like the rapid rise of large scale online or virtual courses and the growth in the size and influence of the for profit providers. Rosovsky's list is also interesting because of its omissions. There is no direct reference to money, income or endowment. Nor is there any reference to infrastructure like laboratories or libraries. Both omissions may be products of a Harvard environment of abundance and comfort but are striking for those from institutions with less.

These longer lists can also be too specific and cover too wide a sweep of issues for effective implementation. Alden and Linn's (2004) list, ranges from reputation to financial security and stresses the international character of highly regarded universities. It also tends to favour well established, older institutions.

For a new university in a developing economy a more focused list that concentrates on core elements of operating principles, policy settings and resource priorities seems more useful. This is especially so when the institution is to pursue a distinctive mission and priorities that are dis-similar to the norm for public universities. This need for a sharply delineated set of key performance measures that guide decision making and resource allocation is heightened when the organisation is a start-up and not the product of a merger of existing schools or the upgrading of established institutions with fixed procedures and stable culture. The performance measures should ensure that attention is paid to the variables that determine academic and institutional excellence.

It may make more sense to look at:

- The steps that have been taken to establish a high quality student intake at undergraduate and graduate levels;

- The policies and practices that attract, retain and reward high quality leaders, faculty and staff;
- The financial stability and future of the university;
- The relationships between university , industry, secondary schools and its academic partners and competitors;
- The funding and policy arrangements to encourage research and excellence in teaching;
- Destinations and quality of graduates.

Only the last of these is an outcome and amenable to measurement. The others are processes or enabling conditions that produce an environment likely to result in learning and scholarship. Assessing these processes and policies requires judgments, hopefully with reference to data or to the practices of other institutions or the standards set by quality assurance and accrediting agencies.

But combined these six elements give us a framework to guide the development of a world class university. They offer sufficient detail to inform resource allocation and set priorities without prescribing a particular model or specifying an institutional mission or purpose. They concentrate in part on activities at the institutional level like recruiting students and faculty. But they also point to the network of relationships that need to be effectively managed and the importance of financial stability and certainty. Finally this short list includes an element of accountability - the destinations and successes of graduates.

In sum these six elements cover the cultural, political, financial and organisational norms that support the creation, operation, sustainability and effectiveness of an institution of higher education. How they are applied will vary from nation to nation but they do offer a framework for action.

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