



## Preface

# World-Class Universities

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The central theme of this issue of *Higher Education Policy* — world-class universities — is high on the agenda of various stakeholders across the globe (see also Altbach and Balán, 2007). Many national governments develop policies to stimulate the emergence or strengthening of such universities. The qualification ‘world-class’ is quite often used, but references to top research or elite universities, or as many of the contributors to this special issue do: the global research university, are made as well. The drivers for such policies are rather common across the countries. Supporting or developing a world-class university — or if the size of the system and the governmental budgets allow for this — several world-class universities, is considered by many to be a necessary and unavoidable step to be able to compete at a global level.

The theme of world-class and top universities is, however, not without ambiguities. For sure, it is understood that universities want to perform at the highest levels and that some want to be the best in the world. Analogous to sports, one convincingly could argue that if a person or team is able to beat its competitors in a global competition, indeed that person or team — for the time being, for future challenges await — can be considered world-class. The comparison with higher education is a bit awkward, for at least two reasons. First, universities do not compete in a similar way. That is, there is no real one-to-one combat or league in which universities compete against each other, leaving exceptions such as students battling in *University Challenge* aside. Terms like ‘beating’, ‘victory’ and ‘defeat’ are not part of the higher education vocabulary yet. If there is something like a competition, it is at most virtual: universities try to perform well in certain areas and benchmark their performance against other universities. Rankings and league tables are good examples of such a form of competition, but even in these competitions it would be too far-fetched to maintain that university X has beaten university Y in a global competition. Second, and more importantly, most often the rules for using the terms ‘world-class’, ‘top’ or ‘elite’ are unclear. In sports, regulations set by international associations define and determine how one can reach the status of world champion. But in the field of higher education self-acclaimed top quality seems to be the name of the game.

Such developments might bring the idea of world-class in jeopardy. One reason for this is straightforward: logic forbids that so many universities



can be considered world-class. A second reason is that higher education institutions quite often neglect to set out in what respect they consider themselves world-class, excellent or leading, let alone that they deliver any proof of their position. One of the statements I found on a university website runs like: ‘we are proud of our reputation of the North-West of England’s leading higher education institution’. Acknowledging that this statement should be interpreted in the context of the broader message the institution wants to convey, it cannot escape our attention that the statement cleverly avoids to mention where the North-West begins and ends, and actually discloses in what respect the institution may be leading.

Less ambiguity — although this is a matter of relativity — exists when it comes to deriving world-class status from rankings. Next to the large number of universities that play word games around the concept of ‘world-class’, there is a fair number of universities that set out where they — literally — stand in terms of ranking and which qualities (performance indicators) have brought them to that position. Such revelations should be welcomed from the transparency perspective, although one could argue there are serious shortcomings when it comes to measuring performances. What could be seen as a much more serious problem, however, is that all this attention to performances gravitates towards an ideal, a typical picture of a particular type of institution: the research-intensive university. The availability of rather hard data on research performance makes it easier to calculate relative positions of departments and universities. But activities less easily to measure — education, service to society — run the risk of being underplayed in the debate and competitions.

What this all boils down to is that the model of the global, research-intensive university has a phenomenal appeal to higher education institutions, irrespective of their current position. Many, arguably too many, higher education institutions aspire to reach ‘world-class’ status, whereas it is debatable whether this would be a sound development. The challenge of reaching world-class status — in its limited meaning of the fairly large research-intensive university — may keep institutional leaders and governments from paying attention to another crucial need: the need to preserve diversified national or continental systems of higher education, in which the research-intensive university co-exists with the small college, and the regional professional higher education institution and in which each of these types has sufficient potential for survival if not prosperity.

## **Contributions to this Issue**

And this brings us to the contributions to this issue. In the introductory article, Mohrman, Ma and Baker set out what they deem to be the eight essential



characteristics of the emerging global model (EGM) of the research university: a mission transcending the boundaries of the nation-state, research-intensive, new roles for faculty members, diversified funding, new relationships with stakeholders, worldwide recruitment, greater internal complexity, and global cooperation with similar institutions. This characterization gives us a good idea of how to distinguish the EGM from other types of universities. It has not been the intention of the authors to delineate these characteristics as ever lasting, neither that it will always be possible to clearly dissect an EGM from a non-EGM in particular cases. But the characteristics provide us with a clear understanding of the phenomenon. The article moves on to explain how the model came about and what the consequences of the emergence of the model are. Although the authors argue that the model should be endorsed, they point at caveats of an unbalanced reliance on the model as well.

The articles by Mohrman and by Baker and Lenhardt describe the development of the EGM in China and Germany, respectively. Whereas Mohrman is rather optimistic of the chances of the EGM in the Chinese way, the authors reflecting on the German situation are less positive. In China, both governmental policies and institutional leaders seem to be very supportive for the development of the EGM and its blossoming seems to be only a matter of time, given the revolutionary changes in Chinese higher education in the past decades. A problem could be that the concept of the EGM is only weakly related to Chinese culture. Baker and Lenhardt argue that there are three serious obstacles that likely are in the way of the EGM in Germany. From a sociological perspective, they maintain that Germany has too long emphasized an outdated university model, leading to three crises: one over the expansion of enrolments, one over the expansion of academic freedom and one over the expansion of the scope of teaching and research within the university. As a consequence, the picture in Germany, despite reform initiatives such as the *Excellenz-Initiative*, is much bleaker than in China.

Ma's contribution to this special issue is a case study of an obvious candidate qualifying for the EGM status: the University of California at Berkeley. In line with the country studies, this case study emphasizes the role of government (science) policy and funding contributing to the position UC Berkeley currently is in. Ma argues that dependency on federal research and development funds have eventually affected the academic structure (e.g. relationships with industry) and culture (impact on university autonomy and accountability) of the university.

The next contribution, by Mok and Deem, although referring to the concept of world-class university, seamlessly fits the overall theme. It addresses particular governmental initiatives to support world-class quality. The paper adds to the two country studies presented, for addressing many other initiatives in Europe and Asia. Most importantly, they highlight two important impacts.



First, where winners (i.e. world-class universities) emerge or are supported, inevitably there are losers as well. Given limited resources, competition in higher education is a zero-sum game: if government by intent allocates funds for research concentration in world-class universities, this will go at the cost of investments in other types of institutions. There is a risk that world-class and EGM initiatives neglect the local and regional dimension in higher education and — more generally — other important roles of higher education beyond producing new knowledge through research. Second, and this particularly relates to world-class in non-American and non-Anglo-Saxon systems, there is a considerable risk that Western models are copied without sufficient reconciliation of the particular domestic needs and values. The authors argue for policy learning instead of policy copying as a way to deal with this risk.

The final two contributions are again case studies. They were not intended by the authors to be part of the special issue, but given the themes addressed, inclusion was warranted. Grant and Kay Harman analyse the emergence of the ‘new’ University of Manchester after the merger of Victoria University of Manchester and the Manchester University of Science and Technology. The merger of the two institutions should be seen in the context of their aim to be globally competitive and among the top 25 (research-intensive) universities by 2015. Hugo Horta focuses on the challenges to the Technical University of Lisbon, Portugal, that wants to strengthen its research base. As will become clear from his analysis, there are barriers that might be in the way of increasing the research intensiveness of the university.

In all, a fine set of papers on the issue of the research-intensive world-class university and the opportunities and barriers — both internal to the organization and external: related to the broader policy context — to achieve such a status. It would be a healthy development that a fair amount of universities would strive for such a status and to deliver the highest quality possible. But let us at the same time not forget that the largest share (possibly more than 99%) of all the higher education institutions in the world cannot — and should not — try to achieve such status, given the sincere risk that we downplay highly valuable objectives of higher education: broadening participation, education for the professions, and educating for citizenship. The world-class universities may claim that these objectives are also core to them, but the evidence so far seems to suggest such objectives are easily neglected.

## Reference

Altbach, P.G. and Balán, J. (eds.) (2007) *World Class Worldwide. Transforming Research Universities in Asia and Latin America*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.