

UNIVERSITIES IN THE WORLD: WHAT FOR?

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In this time of rapid change, leaders of major universities often wonder what course of action they should charter for their institution. In many ways we feel that we are trapped between what has been nicknamed the “Harvardization” and the “Mac Donaldization” of the University. In that context, the question of ranking creates new challenges and opens new debates.

As far as ranking is concerned, my university is an interesting case as it stands sometimes among the top 10 European comprehensive universities, and sometimes floats around the 100th to 150th university worldwide. This disparity is largely due to the degree of autonomy of some of its major components, mostly hospitals which publish under their own name.

Universities in the Global Village

Brussels University is one of the most international institutions in the world, with over one-third of the student body and one-third of the faculty being of foreign origin. Like many universities in major cities, it is a microcosm of the world. After all, the word “universe” is in university, so universities are in the world and the world is in the university.

At the same time, we know that “*The world is a village*”. Villages are usually built around a church and a market place. In today’s collective representation, the university is symbolically somewhere between a place of worship (a church) and a market place (a supermarket). The university is a temple of knowledge, with often a tower as a focus point. It is often directed by a Rector, a word which originally had a religious meaning. New students are like novices to be initiated to the mysteries of knowledge. “*Professori ordinarii*”, like priests, have been ordained and hold a chair from where they teach/preach “*ex cathedra*”. Laboratories are sanctuaries, where one dedicates his life to science. Like religion, science is omnipresent, both scaring and reassuring, invoked and convoked on every occasion. So, the question of ranking is also: “*How do you rank churches or religion?*”

By attendance? By the number of high priests? By its wealth? By the spiritual gratification that it brings to its congregation or by the social impact that its members have on the society at large?

But, universities are also “supermarkets”. Products of education and scientific services are given, and increasingly sold, to an ever widening range of customers. The knowledge-based economy has opened many opportunities and universities have been quick to respond. Specialized knowledge is often no longer simply shared, but turned into profit opportunities. The researcher becomes an *entrepreneur*, knowledge a *product*, and the student a *customer*. Hence, the trend to what has been called “academic capitalism”. The university has become

more and more entrepreneurial; extending itself into new fields and, in the process, is becoming a “multiversity”.

The choice of a university model is a question of values. As pointed out by Derek Bok, former President of Harvard University, universities have a lot to lose in public opinion if they lose their values, as these are the “glue” of the community of scholars at the heart of the university, and their credibility to the outside world.

Over the last two centuries, western universities have shared these modern values:

- Critical inquiry and debate
- Freedom of speech
- Education and research to foster progress
- Preservation of culture and knowledge
- Democracy and social equity.

Are these values still relevant in today’s world?

Are these values shared by universities with different cultural backgrounds?

Is there an agreement on values, like the Declaration of Human Rights?

Which values should World Class Universities pursue and embrace?

Setting Values at the Core

World Class Universities strive for excellence, defined as surpassing the expectations of the stakeholders. Universities have many stakeholders with different expectations which vary significantly and are ever increasing:

- Multiple missions (teaching and education, research and innovation)
- Flexibility in teaching
- Knowledge is exploding
- New services (health care, sport, culture).

Universities are facing a demand overload! With costs rising and state investments decreasing, higher education is more and more perceived as an individual benefit, rather than a collective benefit.

In this context, excellence implies strategic choices. It also requires leadership, commitment, outstanding people and adequate resources.

Excellence must be supported by collaboration and solidarity. World Class Universities contribute to a fairer and more sustainable society, through:

- Social mobility
- Economic and social development (North-South dimension)
- Mutual understanding between communities and cultures
- Dialogue instead of clash of civilizations
- Democracy

Universities interact with their environment. Relevance to the environment is a major challenge and a condition for survival. Occupying an appropriate “niche” in the educational system is as important as cultivating individual excellence. As Professor Zhao pointed out, there is a potential danger of the homogenizing effect of classification and ranking. This was also a concern in Europe with the implementation of the Bologna Process. The goal is to achieve a certain degree of harmonization without losing the diversity and the many opportunities offered in various institutions. Creative networking is also part of excellence and is on the rise in Europe, but interestingly enough; the extremely competitive Anglo-Saxon institutions are not readily prone to be part of those networks.

World Class Universities not only respond to society’s needs, they shape them, especially in the knowledge economy. While fostering critical analysis and free inquiry, they nurture the debate and controversy that are vital to a lively democracy. This contribution of the university is especially critical, faced with a media that are more concerned by their sales and advertising than their role in scrutinizing the public issues. It is more important than ever that universities maintain their autonomy and independence.

Striking a Balance

World Class Universities must find a balance between conflicting demands and values. So I will underline what I believe should be the fundamental role of the university. Although critical, these characteristics are difficult to measure and to apply to a ranking:

Ivory Tower or Open University

World Class Universities interact with their environment and yet they must keep sufficient distance to remain constructively critical. They transform their customers into stakeholders and stakeholders into partners.

Academic Culture or Business Culture

Two cultures exist in today’s universities: an academic culture geared towards knowledge, scientific excellence, academic freedom and sharing of results; and a business culture geared towards production of wealth, profitability and appropriation of results. World Class Universities take the best of both cultures to become entrepreneurial without becoming venal.

Local or Global University

Local universities serve their local communities. Global universities draw resources from all over the world. World Class Universities succeed in meeting international standards and in being deeply committed to the development of their local environments. They are “*glocal*”.

Elitism or Mass Education

In its narrow sense, elitist institutions provide the best education and research opportunities to the wealthy few. Mass institutions provide basic education and research opportunities to the many. World Class Universities provide the best education and research opportunities to all those who have the ability to benefit from them, without wealth discrimination.

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As the Master says:

“I never refuse my teaching to him who comes to me spontaneously—even if he only brings me a bit of dry meat.” (Confucius, Lunyu VII.8)

Disciplinary or Trans-disciplinary Approach

Specialization drives progress and discovery. However, interesting discoveries often occur at the frontier between disciplines. Trans-disciplinary approaches are required to meet major challenges of society, such as terrorism, environmental issues, and epidemics. Decision makers are increasingly asking universities for expertise and advice. World Class Universities integrate specialized research into trans-disciplinary projects, thus the importance of comprehensive universities.

Individual Initiatives or Institutional Strategies

Individuals are the source of universities' creativity. Universities need clear strategies. World Class Universities integrate individual initiatives into their institutional strategies.

Autonomy or Accountability

Universities need sufficient resources to meet their goals. Several presentations have highlighted the strong correlation between ranking and financial strength of the best institutions. However, universities must retain their independence from the providers of funds. World Class Universities must remain autonomous but accountable for the use of their resources.

Century-old Traditions and Rapid Change

World Class Universities combine continuous change and managerial efficiency with century-old traditions.

Ranking Universities

So, with all those expectations in mind, how do we go about ranking universities?

Rankings are useful, as they meet several needs:

- Students need rankings to choose where to study
- Scientists need rankings to know where to work
- Governments need rankings to know where to invest
- University leaders need rankings to know where they stand.

Rankings are increasingly used also for branding and marketing purposes.

But of course, rankings may be misleading. No single ranking can possibly meet all expectations, as different institutions have different purposes and a single profile does not

exist. Quality is difficult to measure, and quantitative indicators can be interpreted in various ways. Furthermore, rankings may transform meaningful quality differences into flat quantitative hierarchical judgments. Rankings are heavily biased by research results of the university and do not measure the human qualities that are learned at university. Furthermore, most students will not do research in the future. Therefore, there is a danger that the higher, social purpose of the university -- to form the true humanist in society—will be overlooked by rankings. And lastly, rankings may have a perverse effect, as institutions strive to improve scores instead of quality.

We are living in the era of the “Hit Parade”, where, fostered by the market mentality, it is becoming very difficult to perceive differences in another way than hierarchy. Lastly, rankings may increase the gap between a few privileged institutions and the others.

The University of Shanghai should be commended for taking up the challenge of producing the first ranking of world universities. It has generated much discussion and introspection in the true world class university spirit.

Of course, there is always room for improvement, as many presentations during this conference have underlined, for example:

- Taking a larger set of indicators
- Improving the quality of the various indicators
- Using multi-criteria analysis.

There is no doubt that in the coming years, we will witness increased sophistication in worldwide rankings.

Conclusion

As I have emphasized, values are essential; they must remain firmly at the center of the universities’ activities and strategic plans. There are also many models of universities and the diversity of institutions is an asset for achieving the best in higher education worldwide. It is thus crucial that universities strike a balance, each in its own way, between their values and expectations. Of course, no single ranking can possibly account for the variety of situations and how universities achieve higher purpose. In any case, the more rankings, the better!

君子不器

“The good man is not a single purpose tool. (Confucius, Lunyu, II.10)

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