

Nine Common Errors in Building a New World-Class University

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In the past decade, the term “world-class university” has become a catch phrase to describe research universities at the pinnacle of the tertiary education hierarchy, as measured by the various international rankings. Around the world, governments have responded to this global reputational competition with additional funding to promote their national elite universities, as illustrated by the various “Excellence Initiatives” in countries as varied as China, Denmark, Germany, Nigeria, Russia, South Korea, Spain, or Taiwan. In some cases, the government has also encouraged its top universities to merge so as to achieve economies of scale and reach a better position to compete globally. A few countries have even decided to establish new universities from scratch, with the explicit purpose of creating world-class institutions.

Achieving the ambitious result of launching a high-quality, new university is easier said than done, however, as building a world-class institution requires more than knee-jerk reactions to the rankings or massive infusion of government money. This engagement is a complex and lengthy process that only recently has begun to receive careful attention. The following paragraphs outline

the most common pitfalls encountered in some of the current projects that aim at establishing a new flagship institution.

#### **WITH A MAGNIFICENT CAMPUS, HOPE FOR MAGIC**

The physical infrastructure is obviously the most visible part of a new university. A lot of care is usually given to the design and construction of impressive facilities—and rightly so. A good infrastructure is certainly an important part of the education experience of students, and researchers need adequate laboratories to carry out leading-edge scientific inquiries. Yet, without an appropriate governance setup, a strong leadership team, a well-thought curriculum, and qualified academics, the beautiful campus will remain little more than an empty shell.

#### **DESIGNING CURRICULUM AFTER CONSTRUCTING FACILITIES**

It is often assumed that teaching and learning can easily adapt to the physical environment of the institution. This may be true for traditional lecture-based teaching, but innovative pedagogical practices require appropriate facilities. For example, interactive approaches, problem-based learning, or pedagogical methods relying heavily on teamwork and peer learning are constrained by the physical limitations of conventional lecture halls or even classrooms. The promoters of a new university should refrain from launching into the architectural design stage of their institution until they have established a clear definition of the vision and mission of the new institution. It is particularly essential to prepare the academic plan of the new institution ahead of the

construction of the physical infrastructure and to tailor the latter to the requirements of the former rather than the other way around.

#### **IMPORT CONTENT FROM SOMEWHERE ELSE**

Why reinvent the wheel? The teams in charge of establishing new universities logically look at top institutions in industrial countries to “buy” elements of their curriculum instead of going through the lengthy process of designing their own programs. But, while this may seem expedient and practical, it is not the most effective way of building the academic culture of a new university that aims to reach high standards. The Harvards and MITs of this world are unique institutions, and it is unrealistic to think that reproducing their organic, academic models is possible. Moreover, it is impractical to envision shopping around and bringing curricular fragments from a variety of top-notch institutions across different countries and cultures and guessing everything could easily gel together and fall in place to create an authentic learning and research culture in the new university.

#### **PLANNING WITH AN ECOSYSTEM IN MIND**

Replicating the features that make flagship universities in North America and Europe successful—concentration of talent, abundant resources, and favorable governance—is a necessary condition but does not encompass the full complement of consideration that underpin a successful world-class institution. Creating and maintaining thriving universities constitute a difficult if not impossible process when the tertiary education ecosystem within which they operate is not fully supportive. The main dimensions of the ecosystem include

leadership at the national level (existence of a vision about the future of tertiary education and the capacity to implement reforms), the regulatory framework (governance structure and management processes at the national and institutional levels), quality-assurance frameworks, the articulation mechanisms integrating the various types of tertiary education institutions, the financial resources and incentives, and the digital and telecommunications infrastructure. The absence of even only one of these elements or the lack of alignment among these various dimensions is likely to compromise the ability of new universities to progress and endure.

#### **POSTPONING THE BOARD AND THE LEADERSHIP TEAM**

The resolution to establish a new university is often a political decision that a ministry or a technical project team is then charged with putting into action. This often leads to a centrally managed design and implementation process. But, a new university cannot be built by a disinterested committee. A project of such magnitude needs to be owned and carried out by a dynamic leadership team, working under the authority of an independent board with the capacity to provide guidance and empowerment. Putting in place an appropriate governance framework from the outset is a key factor of success.

#### **PLANNING FOR UP-FRONT CAPITAL COSTS, BUT IGNORING LONG-TERM FINANCING**

The promoters of a new university usually announce with enthusiasm the huge endowment dedicated to the establishment of the new institution, but the initial capital investment is only one part of the total project. It is essential to provide adequate support for the first few years of operation and to establish a

thoughtful business model that allows the new institution to grow and endure in a financially sustainable manner.

#### **BEING TOO AMBITIOUS IN YOUR QUANTITATIVE TARGETS**

The leaders of new institutions sometimes think that they can rapidly enroll large numbers of students, often in the tens of thousands. This is rarely achieved without sacrificing quality. In the 1970s, E. F. Schumacher wrote in his famous book—*Small Is Beautiful*—that successful development projects were preferably of a small size. Small is still beautiful today, especially when it applies to setting up a new college or university. It is almost always a better idea to begin with a small number of programs and student body if quality is a priority. Once a strong academic culture is in place, it is easier to scale up from there.

#### **EXPECTING YOU CAN DO IT ALL IN 18 MONTHS**

A variant of overambitious planning is assuming that a new institution can be launched in a matter of months, and that high-quality teaching and research can be accomplished within a few years of establishing a new university. In reality, rushing through the initial phase of design and implementation can often lead to hasty decisions that can have an adverse effect on the quality and cost of the project. Furthermore, institution building is a long-term process that requires stable leadership, continuous improvement, and patience. This is especially true when it comes to developing the robust scientific traditions needed to produce leading-edge research and technological applications.

## **RELYING ON FOREIGN ACADEMICS WITHOUT BUILDING UP LOCAL CAPACITY**

Hiring foreign academics is a common practice to accelerate the launch of a new university. Indeed, engaging experienced teachers and researchers to help input new programs makes good sense; it can also form an effective capacity-building strategy when a key part of the mission of the foreign academics is to train younger, less-experienced academics from the host country. On the other hand, it can be a risky and counterproductive approach in the absence of systematic efforts to attract and retain qualified national academics. As with most plans that include reliance on outside actors and forces, this strategy of bringing on foreign academic staff should be one that complements the more fundamental aim of local capacity building.

## **CONCLUSION**

Launching a new tertiary education institution that aspires to attain the highest possible standards is a noble but extremely difficult enterprise. The road to academic excellence is full of avoidable pitfalls, as illustrated by the preceding discussion of most commonly observed errors. More importantly, the decision to build a world-class university must always be examined within the proper context to ensure full alignment with the national tertiary education strategy and to avoid distortions in resource-allocation patterns within the sector. With thoughtful and realistic planning, however, reaching for excellence in tertiary education, at all levels, can only be viewed as a good and significant approach.