

## Strengthening Universities Around the World

ELAINE EL-KHAWAS

Elaine El-Khawas is professor of educational policy at George Washington University, Washington, DC. E-mail: [elkhawas@gwu.edu](mailto:elkhawas@gwu.edu). This article draws on a recent publication, P. G. Altbach and J. Salmi, eds., *The Road to Academic Excellence: The Making of World-Class Research Universities*. Washington, DC: World Bank, 2011 (available at <http://worldbank.org>).

Across the world, university leadership has been transformed in response to calls from government and international organizations, for more effective governance. These requests reflect a broad consensus that countries must improve their national productivity and that universities play a critical role in developing the skills for global competitiveness. A less explicit, underlying concern is that traditional university governance—deliberative decision making, leaders elected from among academics—cannot meet today’s demands. In country after country, universities and tertiary systems have responded—with top leadership that is appointed and governing boards that include representatives of business and other external groups. Rectors are often appointed from the outside and expected to bring prestigious contacts, research achievements, or knowledge of competitors. Leadership has become more strategic and proactive policy.

This process is a significant change, but has it made a difference? Are administrators more effective? Have they made good decisions and set ambitious

goals that will contribute to national prosperity? Or, is this only a structural change—rearranging the furniture, so to speak? Some evidence is found in a World Bank study, *The Road to Academic Excellence*, which highlighted progress by eleven universities, despite differences in their resource levels and external constraints. The study suggests that stronger leadership can make a difference. Several patterns emerged: strategic priorities being implemented; changes in university culture, to become more nimble and results oriented; and systematic monitoring of steps toward higher achievement.

#### **STRATEGIC LINKS**

One striking pattern is the degree to which these universities address national needs for social and economic development. Links to business and industry are strong at most of these institutions, with research and development centers, liaison offices, and incubators—such as, those at the National University of Singapore and at Pohang University in South Korea. The Indian Institute of Technology network, in India, expanded its research and consultancy and strengthened its ongoing education programs to meet alumni and employer needs, for high-skill technology. The University of Ibadan established a Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation and obtains annual revenue to help build capacity in Nigeria’s oil and gas industry. Other universities, including the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, established themselves as advisers to government ministries.

Consistent with their ambitions to build global reputations, most of these universities adopted a strong outward orientation. They sought international partnerships, joined global scholarly networks, and prodded their academics to

conduct research to meet international standards. Shanghai Jiao Tong University extended this initiative to students, organizing study tours, summer training at foreign universities, and dual-degree programs.

#### **INSTITUTION-WIDE CHANGE**

Stronger leadership enabled these universities to implement large changes needed to pursue transformative goals. Under traditional governance, new ideas were too often debated but not acted upon or innovation occurred only on the periphery. Instead, these universities announced priorities affecting the whole institution, based on long-term goals. Many directed growth to certain programs and limited other programs. The National University of Singapore identified academic programs to grow and others to be capped. It established performance-based salary increases and gave start-up funds to newly hired academics. The Indian Institute of Technology-Bombay made an unorthodox but successful decision to require its curriculum to emphasize basic sciences, mathematics, and social sciences. The University of Ibadan set goals for increasing its proportion of postgraduate students and limited undergraduate enrollment. The University of Malaya also directed that graduate enrollment become more than half of its student numbers.

#### **BETTER DECISION MAKING**

Reformers also argued that effective leadership could facilitate strategic and nimble decision making. The World Bank study documents many good decisions. The Monterrey Institute of Technology and Pohang University are private universities in out-of-the-way settings, but both creatively built on

available options for strengthening research. Pohang University became distinctive for its industry-oriented research. Monterrey relied on several strategies, from building ties to the local business community to establishing a revenue-generating lottery. The Pontifical University of Chile, recognizing that dependence on public funding could threaten its independence, became more efficient and more successful in winning competitive research funding. As with Monterrey, it enhanced its financial stability, by developing its hospital and TV station into revenue-generating operations. The Higher School of Economics in Moscow also illustrates nimble decision making, having developed rapidly amidst uncertainty in the 1990s. With no buildings or library, it overcame these constraints by deciding to specialize in a new field, transitional economies; and found international partners to help develop a distinctive curriculum.

#### **OVERCOMING OBSTACLES**

Clear vision and goals helped many institutions to address seemingly intractable problems. Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, as a new institution, was aware that its reputation depended on a strong initial enrollment. As a result, it designed effective outreach to applicants and their parents, including invitational events on its attractive campus. At Shanghai Jiao Tong University, its ability to expand was initially constrained by the urban, high-cost location of its main campus. Its decision to develop a new campus 20 kilometers away was highly successful. The new campus became its main campus, attractive for its advanced technology and facilities, and its location near research and development centers of foreign corporations enriched its research collaborations. Most institutions found it challenging to recruit talented new

faculty, to help them raise their research activity. Yet, strategies helped them make progress. Hong Kong University of Science and Technology reached out to overseas Chinese. Others also developed policies to attract foreign scholars or research collaboration. Monterrey adopted a grow-your-own strategy, supporting PhD study among its academic staff.

### **SYSTEMATIC MONITORING**

Most of these universities developed an evaluative culture, which policymakers had called for as a way to improve university operations. The University of Chile, in a recent strategic plan, placed high priority on developing an information-management system to monitor progress toward academic and administrative goals. Pohang University developed a set of performance indicators and publicized its progress annually. It also introduced a performance-based evaluation system for academic salaries. The Monterrey Institute of Technology created a strategic-planning office, developed indicators of research productivity, and voluntarily sought the scrutiny of accrediting agencies. The University of Malaya regularly invited external assessors and industry representatives to advise on its progress. It also established a performance evaluation for faculty—tied, in part, to international publication rankings. Shanghai Jiao Tong University developed performance indicators, affecting all departments and schools, and benchmarked their progress to peer institutions.

## CONCLUSION

As these university experiences document, new leadership can raise levels of institutional excellence. With clear priority setting, there has been progress toward ambitious goals, opportunities were pursued, and obstacles overcome. Roles, expectations, and the pace of change have been transformed. Evidence exists that new leaders offer open channels for sharing information and arriving at decisions. They often consider various alternatives for implementation, sometimes to phase in change or accommodate special situations. This flexibility does not jeopardize overall goals, while it mitigates some negative effects of change. All of this suggests that these institutions are stronger today, more able to pursue further achievement, and contribute to their nation's development.