

be embraced by both faculty and students. Through the process of incorporating an international and intercultural dimension into curriculum content, colleges therefore expect greater collaboration from academic faculty, a crucial component for a successful process.

At one of the colleges, for example, internationalizing the curriculum was identified with the purpose of curriculum modernization, alignment with the ECTS framework, and using English as medium of instruction in order to promote student and staff mobility, with careful attention on maintaining a “neutral” approach. Communicating this internationalization initiative throughout the campus yielded higher response rates from faculty members than expected.

Israeli colleges embarking on the process of internationalization in general, and internationalization of the curriculum in particular, may greatly benefit from paying attention to several factors. First, the existing institutional culture of entrepreneurship can be leveraged to successfully embrace internationalization, as the latter goes hand in hand with the former. Second, it may be worthwhile engaging all institutional knowledge on how to cope with diversity issues on campus. Finally, how internationalization is depicted and understood throughout their campus needs to be well captured. In the European context, internationalization may sometimes be charged with negative associations, such as the fear of losing an institution’s national identity, or the reluctance to adopt a non-native language of instruction. This does not seem to apply in the Israeli context. “Neutrality” may prove to be a powerful driver for internationalization. From practical experience gathered so far with internationalizing the curriculum at the colleges, it seems to be particularly effective in addressing Jewish-Arab tensions. ■

Excellence Initiatives to Create World-Class Universities: Do They Work?

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In order to accelerate the transformation process towards building “world-class” universities, a few governments—

in China, Denmark, France, Germany, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and Spain, for example—have launched so-called “excellence initiatives,” consisting of large injections of additional funding to boost the performance of their university sector. While many of these programs are fairly young, having started in the past decade or even more recently, they have begun to impact the participating universities in a significant way. This makes it imperative to assess how effective these excellence initiatives have been and draw lessons from recent and ongoing experiences.

It is indeed unlikely that the scientific production of beneficiary universities would increase significantly within the first few years immediately after the beginning of an excellence initiative.

While the first excellence initiatives, especially in East Asia and the Nordic countries, reflected a long-term national policy to strengthen the contribution of tertiary education to economic development, the most recent wave seems to have been primarily stimulated by the global rankings. This was definitely the case with the 2012 French initiative that has encouraged mergers and alliances to give more visibility to the top universities in the country, or the 2013 Academic Excellence Project in Russia, which explicitly aims to place five universities in the top 100 globally by 2020. As a result, most of the excellence initiatives have sought to promote internationalization as a mechanism for attracting top academic talent, thus strengthening the research capacity of leading universities and reducing inbreeding

CHALLENGE OF EVALUATING EXCELLENCE INITIATIVES

Measuring the effectiveness and impact of excellence initiatives on the beneficiary universities is not an easy task for at least two reasons: time and attribution. First, upgrading a university takes many years, eight to ten at the very minimum. Since many excellence initiatives are fairly recent, attempts at measuring success could be premature in most cases. It is indeed unlikely that the scientific production of beneficiary universities would increase significantly within the first few years immediately after the beginning of an excellence initiative. A thorough analysis would therefore require looking at a reasonably large sample of institutions for comparison purposes, either within a given country or across countries, over many years. The second challenge is related to attribution. Even if a statistical correlation could be identified on the basis of a large sample of institutions,

establishing how the excellence initiatives actually caused the positive changes would require an in-depth evaluation.

In the absence of impact analyses of the recent excellence initiatives, comparing the results of the top universities in the Academic Ranking of World Universities (Shanghai Ranking) over the past decade (2004–2015) offers a few insights. The four countries that have made most progress are China (24 additional universities in the top 500), Australia (five additional universities), Saudi Arabia and Taiwan (four additional universities each). All four countries have had one or more excellence initiatives, which have facilitated sustained investment in support of their top universities.

At the bottom of the list, the main “losers” are Japan and the United States, which place, respectively, 15 and 24 universities fewer among the top 500 in 2014, compared to ten years earlier. In the case of the United States, it is interesting to note the relatively higher proportion of public universities that dropped out of the ranking, which tends to confirm the adverse impact of the significant reduction in public subsidies since the 2007 financial crisis.

At the institutional level, the five universities that have climbed most significantly in the ranking over the past decade—Shanghai Jiao Tao University and Fudan University in China, King Saud University in Saudi Arabia, the University of Aix-Marseille in France, and the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology—have all received funding from their respective national excellence initiative.

WHAT POSITIVE CHANGES CAN BE OBSERVED?

Besides supporting entire universities in their improvement efforts, many excellence initiatives have offered funding to build critical mass by establishing new centers of excellence or strengthening existing ones, oftentimes with a focus on multidisciplinary approaches. A recent OECD review of excellence initiatives found that one of their major benefits has been to provide funding for high-impact/high-risk basic research, as well as for interdisciplinary and cooperative research endeavors.

Excellence initiatives often mark a momentous philosophical shift in the funding policies of the participating countries, notably in Europe. In France, Germany, Russia, and Spain, for instance, where all public universities had traditionally been considered to be equally good in terms of performance, the excellence initiatives have brought a move away from the principle of uniform budget entitlements towards a substantial element of competitive, performance-based funding.

Indeed, the selection process to choose the beneficiary universities and/or centers of excellence is perhaps the most noteworthy element of excellence initiatives. In the majority of cases, the government’s approach has involved a competition among eligible universities with a thorough

peer review process to select the best proposals. The peer review process usually relies on the work of expert evaluation teams including a mix of national and international experts.

As competition for funding among universities gets fiercer, the importance of cooperation should not be overlooked. Evidence shows that researchers are most effective when they participate in collaborative projects, nationally or internationally. The Canadian program of chairs of excellence, for example, has brought about unexpected synergies resulting from multiple collaborations across universities.

One of the other positive outcomes of excellence initiatives is that they have allowed a new generation of university leaders to emerge. The successful transformation and upgrading of universities, which is what excellence initiatives pursue, requires indeed a bold vision and the capacity to change the mindset of the academic community in the search of academic excellence.

RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH EXCELLENCE INITIATIVES

At the same time, excellence initiatives may engender negative behaviors and carry adverse consequences. Policy makers and university leaders must keep in mind the risk of harmful effects on teaching and learning quality because of the research emphasis of most excellence initiatives; reduced equality of opportunities for students from underprivileged groups as universities become more selective; and diminished institutional diversity as all institutions aspire to become world-class universities. Another challenge faced by several excellence initiatives is that, in the absence of an appropriate governance reform to free them from civil service regulations and limitations, beneficiary universities tend to create parallel tracks to provide a positive environment for their star researchers, with state-of-the-art laboratories and US-style doctoral schools operating in isolation from the rest of the university, which may remain untouched by the changes financed through the excellence initiative. ■

Funding World-Class Universities

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Governments always face a choice between access and excellence: should resources be spent narrowly on a