

Global Branding and the Celebrity University

SHELDON ROTHBLATT

FEATURED TOPIC

Suffice it to say that in the discussions about brand-name universities, little emphasis is placed on the traditional concerns of undergraduate liberal education

REVIEWING THE STRUCTURAL CHANGES in higher education in the three decades following the Second World War, Ulrich Teichler (1988) of the Gesamthochschule Kassel, an authority on such matters, sensed a loss of interest in “grand visions of a possible optimal model in a modern industrial society.” None of the planning approaches—“diversified models,” “unitary models,” expansion, deregulation (by European govern-

ments), egalitarian

policies—produced the expected reforms.

Two decades on, what do we find? Governments in Europe and federal and state governments in the United States continue to fuss with higher education systems. Their efforts are now driven largely but not entirely by budgetary considerations as the global economy falls victim to crises in housing markets and to high energy and food prices. These, defense expenditures, and natural calamities have increased expenditures for governments and universities alike. With so many demands on public budgets, governments have tried to rein in the costs of earlier expansionist policies by squeezing “efficiency” or “productivity gains” out of state-funded colleges and universities. Terms such as audit, accountability, performance-based learning (a phrase that means nothing in and of itself), and value-added learning have become familiar and contentious. In Europe, “metrics” measurements have entered the lexicon of assessment, leading to speculation over the survival of peer review.¹

Besides seeking an “objective” way to measure productivity in teaching and research, government agencies claim that academics

cannot always be trusted to evaluate themselves honestly or to keep track of institutional expenditures. It is certainly true that careless accounting does occur, that peer review sometimes misfires, and that some academics are prone to ideological decisions. Nonetheless, classic peer review needs no defense. It is the determinant of elite quality; there can be no superior university, indeed no university at all, without it. The history of quality assessments makes that clear. Furthermore, we do not have an accurate reckoning of just how much the new systems of accountability cost in terms of either the academic time spent on meetings and paperwork or the new academic, bureaucratic, and staff careers—and associated office expenses—created to enforce an obsession with dubious measurements.

There are no grand visions here. Rather, there is a messy mixture of assorted suspicions and trial-and-error policies undergoing dizzying revisions. Moreover, despite rhetorical charges and countercharges, there are no conspiracies here either. On the generous side, we might conclude that government efforts to influence the budgetary policies of higher education—and, through them, to influence access and exit—are, at bottom, part of the logic of the nation-state, especially since 1945 when mass-access higher education took off. Given the resources required to support a system of postsecondary education on a scale never before envisioned, attempts to rein in costs in public-sector colleges and universities, instead of passing them on to taxpayers, are at least understandable. Higher education expenses always outpace inflation in any case, which is one reason private colleges and universities in the United States are being pressured to use more of their endowments for tuition discounting.

SHELDON ROTHBLATT is professor emeritus of history at the University of California, Berkeley.



University of California,
Berkeley

The global or “world-class” university

And yet there is a rather grand vision emerging, if not quite in the terms conceived of earlier. It is not of an optimal model for defining or managing a huge system of educational institutions or aligning them with secondary education or labor markets, as was typical in Europe. Nor is it a vision that will make all institutional or academic participants in national higher education systems particularly comfortable. It is by no means a total departure from past considerations, except in two ways. First, it does not affect all colleges and universities directly, although it affects them indirectly. And second, it represents a modification of the very notion of a *national* higher education system integrated through a mix of market and state (local, regional, national) incentives and funding. This emerging grand vision goes by various names, but it is most often referred to as involving a category of researched institutions described as “world-class.”

The logic of the world-class university is the logic of the global economy. Although we are still far from the conception of an extranational or superordinate university, there is that implication. Historians might offer that the medieval university was such a creature, appearing before the evolution of the nation-state, occupying

“territories” with unsettled political boundaries, and enabling students and scholars to move inter- or cross-territorially. Even as it shut down some academic mobility, the advent of the nation-state gave rise to an “invisible college” of gypsy scholars—a network now held together by modern technologies.

The grand vision of a world-class or global university offers one way of coping with certain categories of expenditures. Governments can concentrate resources on institutions with a proven or potential capacity to compete for graduate students, academic talent, and Nobel-quality researchers. The expected results enhance national prestige and generate income by producing cutting-edge innovation in science and technology. Such a university becomes “privatized” by attracting sufficient non-state financial support to meet its operating expenses, strengthen its endowment base, and compete even more vigorously. When an institution promotes excellence in several principal subject areas, the example is likely to spread to all disciplines. Excellence is difficult to acquire; once acquired, it is catching; once caught, it must be sustained (Clark 2004).

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Oxford University

industry has arisen. Expensive marketing consultants are being hired to improve brand recognition. “Tired-looking logos” are being redesigned, and courses are being shaped and reshaped to “sell” (Fearn 2008). While they are at odds with the conventional notion of slowly cumulating knowledge and quiet scholarship, these zippy business strategies have proven useful in attracting paying students from Asian countries. Australian universities have been particularly successful, enrolling more such students from China and Hong Kong than American institutions (Marginson 2008). If there is an example that excites the vision, it is that of the great American private universities, whose fabulous endowment wealth has intoxicated international academic leaders and civil servants. Their example has led such fabled English universities as Cambridge to engage in cooperative research with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology as a way to acquire market know-how.

Burton Clark (1998), the distinguished American sociologist, has studied those “entrepreneurial” universities in England, Scotland, Sweden, Finland, and the Netherlands that have succeeded in attracting international attention and are close to achieving global status. The broad formula for success is clear, but not paradigmatic. Upward movement requires adept leadership with terrific cooperation from all other groups in the academic community, a willingness to restructure internally, strong working relations with outside business and governmental groups, a capacity to rise above internal rivalries to gain a sense of the common good, and a willingness to experiment and take bold decisions without fearing that mistakes will occur—because they will.

Other historians, political scientists, sociologists, and policy analysts have been quick to spot the leading edges of the global university. Particularly noteworthy are Ted Tapper and David Palfreyman (2008), who have shown just how governments are setting about to encourage the emergence of world-class universities within national settings. The hybrid university form prevails. As in the case of Clark’s entrepreneurial universities, institutional resources are drawn from numerous private and

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public funding streams: tuition, gifts, endowments, services, government support for operating expenses or capital projects, research income, science parks, and start-ups. In fact, the hybrid form has long characterized the principal American research universities, even if private. Clark Kerr, America’s leading university president of the past half century, famously remarked that the university is not only a “multiversity” because of its numerous interior partitions and plural responsibilities, but also a “Federal Research Grant University.” Government has always provided the bulk of research income as well as student financial aid and guaranteed loans.

Whether public or private, research universities in receipt of any form of government assistance are always accountable for their expenditures. They are also subject to external rules and regulations that often have an ideological dimension and, therefore, fluctuate according to prevailing political values. Furthermore, as a hybrid, the research university is subject to pressures from both governments and markets. If the research university is also global, it then acquires a third layer of pressures. The combination does not suggest a stable shelf life. In such circumstances, definitions of academic freedom and institutional autonomy are subject to reconsideration.

Global rankings

European Union planners are concerned that, apart from Oxford and Cambridge, none of Europe’s many research universities are among the top twenty globally ranked institutions according to a source that is now on everyone’s lips: the Shanghai Jiao Tong University index of prestige. The rankings game can be faulted from any number of perspectives. To be useful, rankings need to ignore most of the subtle and enduring inheritances of universities. They overplay features derived from market discipline. Yet while complaints are steady, the rankings are taken seriously as a measure of opinion. So vigorous discussions go on about how to gain or strengthen prestige, or what is most to the point, where to focus resources and how to gain more from a combination of government, non-governmental organizations, private foundations, parents, and industry.

Even the French universities, for centuries well behind the great specialized schools in public esteem, have succumbed to rankings pressures. The current universities minister has announced competitive bidding for campus renovation projects. This appears to be a first step in moving French universities away from the historical practice of regarding all as of equal quality, a fiction that many European universities have maintained until now. The fiction was reflected in social democratic policies, but the taboos are being broken where they were once very strong—in Germany, for example (Kehm and Pasternack 2008).

Devolution in the United Kingdom has allowed the Scots to consider entering the global contest for status branding. In the World University Rankings published by the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, the second of the two oft-cited global rankings, Edinburgh University currently occupies the twenty-third place. A task force composed of government officials and academics is now considering the steps required to move Edinburgh up a few pegs and into the top twenty. The leaning in preliminary speculation is that the ultimate function of such a university would be “the creation of economic growth” (Tahir 2008).

Even tiny New Zealand aspires to the top of the charts. Of eight research universities in the islands, the University of Auckland is acknowledged to be the status leader. Celebrating its centenary in 2008, Auckland is nevertheless a new research university in many respects. It acquired independence from a federal system on the London University model only a few decades ago, and it moved from a fairly open admissions policy for undergraduates in the arts and sciences to a system of select entry. Historically built on the attendance of part-time students, the University of Auckland now intends to increase full-time attendance. Auckland’s leaders also propose more emphasis on research, including the hiring of non-teaching staff, and they are following the privatization path now typical of the search for additional revenue. But insofar as privatization cannot possibly replace the income hitherto received from the state, Auckland and the other research universities in New Zealand are engaged in heated negotiations with government ministries over new ways of calculating student funding and defining the future autonomy of campuses.

Global branding trends

While the world-class university can be old or new, antiquity provides distinct advantages. Ancient universities have established reputations, well-placed alumni, attractive facilities, and centuries over which to accumulate donations. Yet it is fascinating to explore the reasons why so many senior continental European universities have not hitherto built global brands. The French case is easiest to understand. Revolutionary and Napoleonic France did not care for clerical influence in the universities, and its technocratic leanings favored the famous alternatives. German and Russian universities, and the universities of the Soviet empire, were destroyed by totalitarian governments and have struggled to rebuild. And in a sense, rebuilding is easier when only a few universities—rather than a national system—are singled out. Elsewhere, social democracy and underinvestment in higher education have had a leveling effect. Note the huge number of students competing for space in Italian universities, and the overcrowding in French universities.

In Italy, the domination of universities by politically connected professorial *baroni* has long restricted the upward mobility of younger academics. It is interesting to speculate on the degree to which academic reputations are individually acquired or first gained under the umbrella of an elite university. If the former, then institutional affiliation is not critical; but if the latter, campus reputation is vital, and faculty loyalty is therefore a factor in the branding phenomenon.

Anglophone countries seem to be particularly status-minded. One explanation lies in social class inheritances and conceptions of the gentleman. Academics are professionals. Samuel Haber (1991) has explained that in America the professions inherited a precapitalist gentlemanly ethic that later came into conflict with market-derived status. His examples are drawn from medicine, law, and engineering, but similar tensions are reflected in academic life. Less attractively, gentlemanly attitudes reinforced academic prejudices against Jews and Roman Catholics in the United States until the end of the Second World War. In England, Oxford and Cambridge absorbed the cachet of an aristocratic and Anglican establishment. While those institutions are essentially meritocratic today,

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no one disagrees that past associations provide a distinct competitive edge. Both universities are now embarked on monumental fundraising campaigns, contacting graduates worldwide.

Elsewhere, antiquity also goes hand-in-hand with esteem. Japan has decided to bestow attention on its older institutions, favoring its sometime “imperial” Tokyo University and its premier private institution, Waseda. The Tokyo Institute of Technology, established in 1929, has risen to national standing. In Europe, Lund and Uppsala, despite the Scandinavian welfare state inheritance, often pop up in conversation, as do the Royal Institute of Technology and the famous medical university, the Karolinska. Norway’s government and universities are becoming more elite-minded and embarking on a policy of raising entry standards, restricting numbers, and emphasizing research and graduate instruction—to include American-style self-contained graduate schools (Vabo and Aamodt 2008). This is particularly significant in light of Norway’s pronounced egalitarian heritage. In Israel, the Hebrew University, as the second oldest institution of higher education, is venerated, and so too is the Technion, the oldest by a few years. The latter, with its recent Nobel Laureates, is well-positioned for

privatization activities and draws considerable support from abroad.

These are the general trends. Social democratic heritages cannot be simply overthrown, but the world-class university is definitely regarded as an asset to the nation-state. While the word “elite” still has an invidious connotation for some and will continue to be used pejoratively, it is nonetheless regaining its former meaning of “best.” Similarly the diminished word “flagship” to describe the lead institution of a multi-campus federation is making a comeback. But the story cannot end at this point, and it is useful to point out some of the major ironies involved in the phenomenon of the world-class university.

Lurking grand visions?

It comes as no surprise that with so much attention and so many resources bestowed upon a few universities, there are new concerns about the wealth gap, which is already large. The United States is accustomed to immense disparities in institutional revenue, although the elite public universities are now particularly worried about their reputations since their endowments are, for the most part, substantially lower than the renowned privates. Universities in countries where private giving



Vesalius College

is unfamiliar, or private wealth limited, have cause to worry that a stress on “world-class” institutions will mean less per-student income for them. It may also mean a cap on any aspirations for enhancing a research mission and a greater likelihood that they will become the skills and proficiencies workhorses of the global higher education system.

Ironically, while the branded institutions declare their commitment to affirmative action or (in France) “positive discrimination,” the elite or merit selection necessary for international recognition invariably works against such policies. It is no secret that the most competitive students, exceptions apart, are drawn from the more comfortable families in any society, those enjoying what it has become fashionable to call “cultural capital” (Rothblatt 2007).

While it is admitted on all sides that competition within a global economy requires maximum institutional flexibility—an ability to shift priorities quickly, gauge markets, rearrange interior disciplinary boundaries, and take risks—government ministers and bureaucracies are paradoxically reluctant to allow research universities an absolutely free hand. Charged with generating wealth, the celebrity university—roaming global markets in search of talent, students, and resources—is too valuable for states to ignore. And as more than one

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observer has noticed, operating in the world arena represents a threat to the national control of research universities that has been so much a feature of the modern history of universities, especially outside the United States.

Even though academics understand that a concern for standards is sometimes a euphemism for standardization—the enemy of intellectual curiosity and experiment—talk about “standards” is rife. But governmental and bureaucratic oversight bodies are not directly involved in research and classroom teaching, and they cannot easily assess the enormous and necessary variations in national mass higher education systems. The tendency is to “steer,” to establish “targets,” to measure “outputs,” to ask for “skills,” and to fine-tune prior methods of assessment. The vice chancellors in New Zealand, in a statement rather typical of today, fear that recent government funding and accountability proposals will lead to “sweeping and unfettered bureaucratic control over university activities” (University of Auckland 2007). The historian Thorsten Nybom (2008) is highly skeptical about whether the supposed uncoupling of the nation-state from the university is genuine. He sees a process of reregulation by other means.

The strength of the global university phenomenon is precisely that it functions across many different fronts and within innumerable



Cambridge University

markets. But governments want their leading institutions to be accountable, and accountability requires that reporting lines be clear. Thus, conceptions of the world-class university invariably involve discussions of academic decision making: Should the principal authority lie at the top, with presidents, rectors, and vice chancellors? Or should collegiate forms of governance by committee—as, for example, embodied in academic senates—prevail? What should be the role of trustees? Burton Clark's analyses suggest that cooperation rather than rivalry is the path to success. But it cannot be denied that, at present, considerable faculty anxiety exists over what is decried as a managerial challenge to received traditions of shared governance, however much those traditions have in fact already departed from earlier centuries. Designating campus heads as CEOs does not help the case.

It has been common, if not necessarily accurate, for universities, even research universities, to claim that teaching and research are somehow “balanced.” In this metaphysical equation, because graduate and professional instruction is closely allied to research or vocational functions, “teaching” refers to undergraduate instruction. Suffice it to say that in the discussions about brand-name universities, little emphasis is placed on the traditional concerns of undergraduate liberal education, such as citizenship, self-realization, or the transmission of cultural legacies. Yet as Guy Neave has correctly observed (2001, 24), “even revolutions inherit values from those they overthrow.” So who knows? And to mix the metaphors, there may be a grand vision or two still lurking in the recipes of the past. □

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NOTE

1. For example, citation indices, which have been around for some time and are used in international rankings. In Britain, the “soft” peer review research assessment will be eased out as metrics are brought in. Institutional audit for quality assurance in teaching and learning is to receive greater stress. But so controversial is the metrics issue that interagency quarrels have erupted (see Corbyn 2008). The Australian government has promised to use both metrics and peer review. Metrics “help keep costs down.” As to the issue of who exactly is to assess the worth of metrics, the Australians report that “expert review” remains essential for disciplines (see Gill 2008).