



A World Class University: UiTM in Focus

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ABSTRACT

Globalisation does not only pressure manufacturers to produce better products but, also institution of higher learning to produce better graduates who are of global standards and able to become global players in the future. The needs to produce higher quality graduates also lead institutions around the world wanting to be recognised as World Class University (WCU). This paper discusses the general view of a world class university and its characteristics. At the end it touches on UiTM preparation of becoming a WCU.

Keywords: *World-class university, definition, best practice, characteristics*

Introduction

As communication becomes borderless, the requirement of being able to compete globally intensifies. Hence, countries around the world must be able to provide services and products that are of acceptable standard and quality. Globalisation has created needs to produce skilled workers in businesses across the nation in the world as multinational companies spread their grips on consumers. As a result, people of the world must possess the relevant skills and knowledge in order to be accepted by multinational companies that will establish branches in countries other than their own. This, in the end, puts the pressure on the hosting country to provide supply of manpower to meet the job market with such requirements.

The movement of providing capable manpower in meeting the current world economic trends coins the term "world class" in almost every single thing at present. A world-class product for instance, would, of course, refer to a product that receives worldwide acceptance as it meets all the requirements set forth by the current market trend. Therefore, from the point of view of manpower supply, the hosting country should be able to supply capable and skilled workers as required by the investing multinational companies in fulfilling its quality and upholding its integrity. The easiest way of doing this is to provide education of high standard and acceptable quality.

Education is the most important and powerful tool that can ensure production of qualified and skilled workers for the forever demanding job market in this millennium. Universities in countries around the world are competing with each other in producing world class graduates with the hope that these graduates are acceptable world wide. At the same time, the university itself proves that it offers courses of world class standard and plays an important strategy for national development especially in the developing countries (Wang 2001). This notion of offering World Class courses once again places universities around the world in the race of becoming a World Class university.

What is a World Class University?

According to The Reader's Digest Oxford 'Complete Word finder (1994), 'university' means 'an educational institution designed for instruction, examination, or both, of students in many branches of advanced learning, conferring degrees in various faculties, and often embodying colleges and similar institutions'. Meanwhile, The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2003) defines 'university' as 'an educational institution at the highest level, where you study for a degree, and 'world-class' is defined as 'among the best in the world'.

'World class' is defined as 'a quality of standard regarded as high throughout the world'. "World Class" literary means ranked among the foremost in the world of international standard of excellence. In the perspectives of institution of higher learning, world class university learning means the standard of the university itself stands amongst the world's best universities in terms of its academic courses, facilities, graduates and research. World class also means having a full range of programs that help educate all students as widely as possible: to speak the languages spoken around the world, to understand the politics, economics, societies, and cultures they are likely to encounter in their working lives (Hobbs 1997).

Patrick Aebisher, President of a very successful Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne (EPFL) (2004), points to three key factors to establishing a world class university – attracting the best students, the best teachers, and ensuring adequate financial resources – but also highlights the importance of a clear mission, adequate autonomy, an attractive location and branding. Meanwhile, Nikolaus van der Pas, Director-General of the European Commission's Education and Culture stated that the path to excellence is a much simpler one – mobility and quality assurance (ISO 9001/2000 for instance) are the principal requirements. From these alone, the diversification of world

class university definition is being demonstrated. As the exact definition of a world class university has yet to be determined, many experts have agreed upon benchmarking as the basis of analysis (Altbach 2004). Among the areas of benchmarking are:

- i. Excellent research program
- ii. Academic freedom and atmosphere of intellectual excitement
- iii. Good governance of institution
- iv. Adequate facilities
- v. Sufficient funding

These five elements of benchmarking, if were to be scrutinised closely, are inline with what Aebischer and Nikolaus van der Pas stated. Hence, to be recognised as a World Class university, any institution has to adhere to the above five areas. Being able to meet the benchmarking set fourth from the five areas will definitely place any interested institution on the path of achieving the so called “world class” university.

World-Class University and Best Practices

What does a university do to make itself world-class? How does a university attain its world class stature and what does it practice? According to the President of University of Southern California (USC) (2004), in the group of World-Class Universities, one world-class university might not look like another: “each has individual traits and an individual history that makes it unique”. Who decides whether a university is world-class or not? This is an interesting question. Our perception is that peer recognition receives from the academic world is the measure of “world-classiness”. Needless to say, there are organisations and bodies, such as the Business Weekly, U.S. News and World Report, Fiske Guide to Colleges and Peterson’s that periodically rank the universities world-wide. Our perception here is that rankings from the external observers mentioned above cater mainly for the consumption of prospective students seeking enrolment in a university in a highly competitive education market (UTM 2003).

The University of Southern California quotation on their priorities for WCU samples are that, “the first priority at all world-class university is education for all levels, from undergraduate to post-doctoral. This is accomplished through “an array of academic, professional and extra curricular programs of the first rank”. The second emphasis is research. “Research and teaching are inextricably intertwined, and on which the nation depends from a steady stream of new knowledge, art and technology”. The third but by no means least emphasised is the faculty. The faculty is a group of high achievers who enjoys intellectual discovery and artistic creation and has the ability to transmit the excitement of learning to students and peers and who inspires “intellectual curiosity and creativity in the next generation” (UTM 2003).

According to the Vice Chancellor of Cambridge University, Prof. Alison Richard, (who is a former Vice Chancellor of Yale University); a great university is defined by its aspiration to excellence within all the major fields. Meeting those aspirations does, of course, require resources, but resources alone will not make a university great. The integration of teaching with research is a hallmark of Cambridge’s distinction. Cambridge has acknowledged the need for greater resources in the sector, but the Vice Chancellor also care deeply about access. Developing a fully-fledged bursary programme, open to students of any background is an absolute priority (Richard 2003).

Education plays a vital role in the development of the socio-politics and economy of a country. A well-educated population can enhance the social harmony and promote economic growth. It is no surprise that a large portion of the national budget of many developing nations have been allocated for education and lately, a considerable amount of this budget have been allocated for the development of ICT in schools and colleges as a further step in embracing the digital age (Sivapalan 2004).

As we move from e-economy to K-economy, life long education will become more prominent than ever. With the shortening of product and information life cycles, the need for more frequent training is inevitable. Workers must be continuously trained to enhance their knowledge and skills so that the company may remain competitive in a networked global village (Asirvatham 1999). Malaysia should at least create one university that can be among the top 10 universities in Asia and we do not even have one within the top 50, that would be a challenge, but if such a university could be created, it would enhance the standing of Malaysian science and technology field (Sivapalan 2004).

The realisation of world-class universities is a dream of every researcher, higher education institution and government. However, their creation and the maintenance of their status are not easy even in high developed industrial countries (Yonezawa 2003). World Class Universities appear in many sizes, configurations, and locations. They can be a large or a small university like the University of Michigan, at Ann Arbor with 38,000 students but Princeton University only has 6,000 students. A world-class university can be either public or private (e.g. the University of California, at Berkeley and Stanford University) and they can be found in all parts of the world such as, Harvard University in North America, Cambridge University in United Kingdom, Paris-Sorbonne University in France and the National University of Singapore in Asia). While these institutions differ in many ways, their

histories, and those of other leading institutions, the fact remains that attaining academic pre-eminence requires:

- i. A commitment to attracting, cultivating, and retaining, based on international standards, the best possible faculty and students, combined with relentless evaluation, in the form of internal and external reviews.
- ii. Generating and flexible resources, allocated to support and encourage excellence
- iii. Effective governance based on explicit roles and responsibilities for the board, administration, and faculty, allowing decisions to be made in a timely and effective manner (Korea WCU Plan 2003).

World class institutions strive to compare themselves to other similar institutions. They compete based on externally-focused, international standards. According to White House National Science Advisor and former President of the State University of New York at Stony Brook, excellence can be achieved only with respect to standards set by the society. Organisational that set isolated internal standards of excellence eventually drifts away from the highest expectations of the world society. Organisational excellence occurs only when the people making up the organisation perform excellently. Therefore, any organisation aspiring to excellence must arrange to evaluate its people continually, and the evaluation must have an external component (Marburger 2001).

Definition of World Class University

There is no agreed-upon definition of what constitutes a world-class university, although Chinese academics point most often to greater acceptance of research in international journals, especially in the natural and physical sciences. Other criteria for excellence parallel the wish list of American universities – more buildings, more publications, up-to-date laboratory equipment, star professors and always more money (Mohrman 2005).

Even in the United States, few universities have managed to claw their way to the top. In other countries, the number of top-tier institutions is also limited, even when, as in Germany, the government treats all universities the same in terms of budgets and mission. The most elite universities are located in a handful of countries – in the mid-1980s, the Asian Wall Street Journal listed among the top ten, only four not in the United States: Cambridge and Oxford Universities, the University of Paris-Sorbonne, and the University of Tokyo. It is of course, the judgment of others that carries a university into the rarified ranks of world-class institutions, and no one has figured out how to conduct an appropriate international evaluation.

The definition of a world-class university is a topic on which many university leaders have commented. Ambrose King, former Vice Chancellor of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, provides three characteristics of a great university. First, it has faculty regularly publishing their research in the top “defining” journals in their respective disciplines. Second, the graduate student body is truly international in origin. And third, the graduates are employable anywhere in the world.

A different perspective comes from Ruth Simmons; President of Brown University, in an article entitled “How to Make a World Class University (South China Morning Post, January 18, 2003). She believes that an excellent university system must be grounded in the culture of the society in which it is located. Universities, she believes, are important institutions to help societies further their specific goals. She emphasizes that “the bedrock of university quality in the United States is peer review, a system in which standards are set by leaders of the field and those leaders are themselves challenged and judged by this process”.

Simmon (2003) continues by looking toward the future. “Universities promote the capacity of scholars to develop original work that is not immediately applicable or useful. Great universities are not only useful in their own time but in preparing for future times. What allows a great university to do that is as little interference from the state as possible. The role of the state is to provide resources but to give wide latitude to universities’ leaders to decide how scholarship is to advance.” And, finally, Simmon cautions that “education should never become an assembly line. Once it does, you may have a certain level of production, but you will never get the volume of creative thinkers that make a democratic society work.”

The dictionary defines world class as “ranking among the foremost in the world; of an international standard of excellence”. Fair enough, but in higher education, who decides? The following characteristics have by no means been agreed upon by teams of experts, they are meant simply as benchmarks to provide the basis for debate and analysis (Altbach 2004). Excellence in research underpins the idea of world class – research that is recognised by peers and that pushes back the frontiers of knowledge. Such research can be measured and communicated. But if research is the central element, other aspects of a university are required to make outstanding research possible. Top-quality professors are, of course, central, and to attract and retain the best academic staff, favourable working conditions must be available (Altbach 2004). From this point, the meaning favorable working conditions can be job security, that is good salary and benefits, as well as good facilities and infrastructures including ICT system to support their research and teaching.

In each case, these academic leaders are talking about qualitative and quantitative factors, an ethos of intellectual exploration and creativity, and a focus on the long-term role of universities as well as the short-term contributions that institutions can make to their society. An internationally recognised scholarly ethos, however, may

take longer to develop than many academic or political leaders are willing to admit. Simply buying state-of-the-art laboratory equipment or pushing for more journal articles will not guarantee the kind of intellectual atmosphere that has developed over centuries on European and American campuses. Even academic leaders in China acknowledge this reality when they say that it will take a generation to create truly world-class universities in China.

An Overview of World Class University Characteristics

Hobb (2001) suggests that there are extremely few world-class universities that are not also strong research universities. This is not to say that research universities are the only worthy ones. The varied institutions of higher education – community colleges, private liberal arts colleges, four-year comprehensive universities, and research universities have different roles, and all of these institutions are important. For each institution, the transmission of knowledge and strategies for learning is still the main concern even though knowledge is primarily discovered at the research universities.

Altbach (2004) states, world-class universities have a significant measure of internal self-governance and an entrenched tradition, often buttressed statutes, ensuring that the academic community has control over the central elements of academic life – the admission of students, the curriculum, the criteria for the award of degrees, the selection of new members of the professoriate, and the basic direction of the academic work of the institution. Adequate facilities for academic work are essential – the most advanced and creative research and the most innovative teaching rely on access to appropriate libraries and laboratories, as well as to the internet and other electronic resources. Although the internet has given rise to some cost savings and has eased access to many kinds of knowledge, it is by no means a panacea. The facilities needed go beyond labs and libraries – staff and professors must have adequate offices as well (Altbach 2004).

Adequate funding should be available to support the university's research and teaching as well as its other functions, and the support must be consistent and long term. The cost of maintaining a research university continues to grow because of the increasing complexity and expense of scientific research. Universities cannot benefit from many of the productivity achieved through automation because teaching and learning still generally require professors and students to be in direct contact (Altbach 2004).

UiTM Scenario

UiTM started its quest of becoming a WCU with the restructuring plan that took off in 2001. This 10-year plan sees UiTM build up its strength in meeting the challenges that will come along with the WCU stature.

The latest planning has seen that focus is given on establishing good governance as the ground work which necessitates the transformation process. World class universities have a significant measure of internal self-governance (Altbach 2004). A solid ground work is needed as procedural aspect of the university needs to be tailored to becoming a research university as it is now still a teaching university. With its good governance, which is hoped to be fully materialised in 2010, UiTM will change its status to a research university as opposed to its current teaching university stature. This is seen crucial as research findings are the main elements of world acceptance of the academics quality and capabilities. It is very vital for UiTM to build up strong and solid research foundation because most WCU are strong research university. This makes the need to produce good and viable research paramount.

It is hoped that once UiTM has become a research university, it is able to have the competitive edge in meeting the challenges to stand up from other universities in the local academia. This is why UiTM plans to be one of the best universities by 2015 after a 5-year preparation of building solid research foundation. This planning states that UiTM will achieve its WCU stature by the year 2020 after fulfilling all the necessary ground work requirements. The 20-year duration should provide UiTM with all the required characteristics and elements in becoming a WCU.

Conclusion

Today, almost all universities race to be recognised as a world class university. However, it is not easy to attain the status and the standards set in becoming one. Malaysia is not the only country that is trying hard to produce at least one university that is ranked among the world-class universities in the world. Government's aspiration, mission and vision in producing one good university with a world-class standard is not enough, the vision should be clearly defined and understood by the people.

UiTM's aim in becoming a WCU should be much applauded. It shows that UiTM dares to take the challenge and is trying to bring its name to a much higher status. However, UiTM should be careful when producing graduates in quantity because it will somehow tarnish the quality of the students in becoming marketable graduates. Industries do not want a university manufacturing students, but they want quality graduates who are able to think on their own, as creative and as innovative as they should be. They want dynamic and pro-active graduates who should be able to

change effortlessly and not as manufactured products who are all the same in terms of knowledge, ability and conduct.

All in all, it is not impossible for Malaysia to have at least one good world-class university, but to achieve aim; the government should give their full support to universities, especially in providing funds, i.e. research grants and scholarships, self-governance and adequate facilities such as ICT facilities, laboratories and libraries. By giving these supports to UiTM academicians and students, UiTM could achieve its aim in becoming a world-class university by the year 2020.

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