

The Push to Have a World-Class University

Val D. Rust^{a,*} and W. James Jacob^b

^a*University of California, Los Angeles, USA*

^b*University of Pittsburgh, USA*

Those of us involved in the CIES Higher Education SIG (HESIG) are aware of the global push to establish world-class universities. According to Philip Altbach (2003, p. 5), every country “wants a world-class university. No country feels it can do without one. The problem is that no one knows what a world-class university is, and no one has figured out how to get one. Everyone, however, refers to the concept.” The “best” institutions are those that score high on arbitrary indicators and weightings chosen by whoever is doing the ranking.

The one thing we know is that among the tens of thousands of universities in the world, only a very few are world-class. And the most elite universities are concentrated in a relatively small number of countries, including the United States, Japan, and the United Kingdom. In most countries universities are stratified and differentiated, and those that are world class represent a tiny pinnacle of institutions. Even in the United States, of the more than 4,300 academic institutions, very few have managed to make their way to the top echelons.

Some areas of the world are making large commitments to developing world class institutions. We shall comment here on Russia and China. In Russia, President Medvedev announced the creation of a pilot program designed to create national research universities in an effort to help the country modernize its higher education system and help the country’s higher education institutions become competitive with the best institutions. The goal of this commitment to enhance higher education is ultimately to boost Russia’s social and economic development and to help the country become an active member of the world community.

The Russians initiated a nationwide competition that resulted in the selection of universities that were designated “National Research Universities.” Two other institutions, Moscow State University and St. Petersburg State University, were designated “special status” universities. Finally, two new universities, National Nuclear Research University and National Research Technological University are being created to ensure the development of advanced study in science, technology, and engineering.

Russia is keenly aware that it cannot accomplish its goals without active assistance from abroad. Educational partnerships involving exchanges in technology, communications, and pedagogy would be crucial. Russia is actively seeking to establish partnerships with US and European universities.

On 4 May 1998, China’s Pre-President Jiang Zemin announced the intention to have several world-class universities to accelerate the process of modernization. In reaction to this announcement, the Minister of Education suggested that the central government should provide one percent of annual financial income to support the establishment of several world-class universities.

Even though this step signaled the origins of the well-known “Project 985” (named for its May 2008 announcement date), prior steps had already been taken. In 1995 the national government had initiated Project 211, designed to develop 100 world-class universities in the twenty-first century (named for 1 in century 21). Such ambitions were significant, because China had long seen itself as relatively weak in terms of its contribution to higher education on a world scale. This self perception stood in contrast to its self-image as one of the great civilizations of the earth, and its quest to es-

*Corresponding author: Email: rust@gseis.ucla.edu; Address: University of California, Los Angeles, Moore Hall 2141, 405 Hilgard Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90095-1521, USA.

establish world-class universities has been both symbolic and practical. Symbolically, world-class universities would convey to the world China's value as a great civilization. Practically, higher education is seen as essential for social and economic development.

Project 211 represents the first major effort in this era by China to strengthen higher education by developing key disciplines, improving its Internet system, and building its institutional capacity. The 1999 announcement led to the naming of the first group of nine universities that would become world-class, including Peking University and Tsinghua University. After that, another 30 universities successively gained membership into this great universities club, and received different amounts of additional funding, not only from the central government but local governments and some special national institutes. Project 985 extends the earlier initiative but emphasizes "management reform, faculty development, creation of research bases and centers, infrastructure upgrades to support instruction and research, and expanded international cooperation."

These universities are regarded as the top universities in China, however, in terms of the contributions to national or global economic development and human progress in other areas, it is common knowledge in China that they are not yet competitive with world-class universities in the West, such as Harvard, Cambridge, Yale, and the University of California, Berkeley.

To this point, the 39 universities have finished their second-period research plan and the third-period plan was being initiated in 2009. To the central government, creating some world-class universities is a kind of shortcut to involve international competition on new scientific and technological revolutions, which are related to the national power competition in the world. To local governments, having one or more great universities means having more competitive accountancies against other provinces. As a result, ordinary people are paying more attention to higher educa-

tion, and are beginning to encourage their young generations trying their best to enter into those best universities.

A key feature in the global race is academic capitalism, distinguished by universities that have become entrepreneurial marketers and treat knowledge as a commodity rather than a public good. Another feature is an increase in institutional mergers, which involve the melding of "strong" and "weak" institutions, intending to enhance a country's competitive advantage. With growing demand for higher education in the free-market system, the global higher education environment is also experiencing increased provision of private and cross-border higher education, accompanied by student mobility.

In the evolving global system of higher education, being competitive becomes key, and global positioning is integral to competing with other nations and institutions. Some scholars claim that universities are currently in a "reputation race," in which they compete for reputation and academic prestige. Furthermore, Simon Marginson (2006, p. 27), from the University of Melbourne, argues that "the more an individual university aspires to the top end of competition, the more significant global referencing becomes." Universities, and the countries in which they are located, thus seek to project the best image possible in order to be poised to compete for research funding, the "best and brightest" international students, and "star" faculty members.

Moreover, all of this emphasis "gravitates towards an ideal, a typical picture of a particular type of institution," (Huisman 2008, p. 2) what Kathryn Mohrman, Wanhua Ma, and David Baker (2008) call the Emerging Global Model (EGM) of the top stratum of research universities.

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