

THE EVOLUTION OF FLAGSHIP UNIVERSITIES: From the Traditional to the New

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ABSTRACT

In the face of the dominant World Class University rhetoric and ranking paradigm, most academic leaders and their academic communities have had difficulty conceptualizing and articulating their grander purpose and multiple engagements with society. Some seem to wait for the next ministerial edict to help or push them toward greater societal relevancy – often limited to improved global rankings. This essay discusses the evolving idea of the Flagship University, its past and future, and the need to develop and articulate a more holistic and modern narrative regarding the role of these important institutions. The *New Flagship University* is an institution grounded in its historical purpose, but remarkably different in its devotion to access and equity, to the quality of its teaching, research and public services mission, and to meeting national and regional socioeconomic needs. This essay briefly discusses some of the central themes in the book, *The New Flagship University*, and includes observations in recent articles by scholars and researchers on their relevancy in various parts of the world. Leading national or *Flagship Universities* are now more important for socioeconomic mobility, for knowledge production, for generating economic and civic leaders, and for pushing innovation and societal self-reflection than in any other time in their history.

Keywords: New Flagship Universities, Teaching, Research, Public Service, World Class Universities, Global Rankings.

The concept of the public Flagship University as a leading national or regional public university has its origins in the emergence of America's network of public universities in the mid-1800s. It included a devotion to the English tradition of the residential college as well as the emerging Humboldtian model of independent research and graduate studies, in which academic research would, in turn, inform and shape teaching and build a stronger academic community. But just as important, the hybrid American public university model sought utilitarian relevance. Teaching and research would purposefully advance socioeconomic mobility and economic development. As part of an emerging national investment in education, public universities also had a role in nurturing and guiding the development of other educational institutions. For these and other reasons, America's leading state universities were to be more practical, more engaged in society than their counterparts in Europe and elsewhere, evolving and expanding their activities in reaction to societal needs.

By the 1870s, most states had established one or more public universities—the first step in developing the world's first mass higher education system. In their mission to educate and train virtuous citizens and economic and political leaders, they also played a key role in supporting America's experimental democracy. For only an educated citizenry, it was believed, could properly carry out the civic responsibilities of a participatory form of government.

In his effort to establish the University of Virginia, Thomas Jefferson noted the importance of higher education in a young nation with no monarchy or apparent class structure and governing elite. Universities could generate an "aristocracy of talent"; they could be the primary means of promoting science and learning useful to a land of yeomen farmers and merchants. In a very real sense, universities were to be the American embodiment of the Enlightenment: a progressive institution devoted to reason, to individual empowerment, to pragmatism.

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A Tripartite Mission – Not only Teaching and Research, but also Public Service

As state-chartered public universities grew in their numbers and influence, the words “Flagship University” emerged in the United States, drawing on the nautical term in which the flagship or lead ship in a navy provided the primary means of coordinating naval maneuvers by an admiral or his staff. Usually one university attained a leadership position in a growing network of public institutions entrusted with a broad mission to shape society, regional economies, and other public institutions.

In that cause, the American public university purposefully opened their doors to a wide range of citizens from different economic, social, religious, and geographic backgrounds—a marked contrast to the array of private colleges and universities that were linked to sectarian communities and social classes. These new public universities were also distinctly secular although not godless, reflecting the emerging principles of America as a nation: the first secular and constitutionally based government in the world. Although severely hampered by overt racism and other forms of discrimination, the ideal was that public universities needed to be open to all who had the interest and abilities to benefit from a course of study.

Flagship public universities were also conceived as comprehensive institutions, and not simply as polytechnics. They incorporated traditional liberal arts fields of the era and professionally oriented programs with a direct service to local and regional economies. Teaching and research in areas such as agriculture and engineering, along with programs providing educational services to farmers and local businesses, helped fuel economic development and socioeconomic mobility. This “tripartite mission” of teaching, research, *and* public service (broadly defined) remains an ingrained component of America’s public universities. Public service and engagement in economic development is now called a “third mission” by ministries and universities in most parts of the world, as if it were a new adventure and a departure from the traditional, and more comfortable, spheres of teaching and autonomous forms of research. This was never an ancillary activity of public universities in the United States, but part of their “core” purpose.

America’s public universities also took responsibility for setting standards and developing other sectors of a state’s evolving education system—from the elementary and secondary schools, to other public tertiary institutions. State and local governments have the responsibility to build and regulate their education systems, and most initially invested in “common schools” (what today are elementary schools) and in one or more universities and colleges, but not in secondary education. State Flagship universities were central players in helping to develop the public high school as part of their assigned role to increase educational attainment rates, and to boost the number of qualified students for higher education.

Broad access, a wide array of academic programs, purposeful engagement with local economies, and leadership in developing public education – each remain the hallmarks of America’s Flagship Universities. There were geographical differences, however, in the emergence of the American public university. On the eastern seaboard, where the US population first settled, private institutions dominated, and state governments were extremely slow to develop public universities. In the Midwest and throughout the West, however, states rushed to create new educational opportunities and established these key institutions.

Under the US constitution, states have the responsibility for organizing and coordinating their education systems. There is no equivalent power at the federal level in the United States to the higher education ministries found in most other parts of the world. However, the push toward the Flagship model had an extremely important impetus from Washington, DC. In 1862, and in the midst of the American Civil War, Congress passed and President Abraham Lincoln signed the Agricultural College Land Grant Act. This seminal legislation offered the one thing the federal government had lots of: land, largely in the expansive West. Each state was given federal lands to sell and generate income with which to establish universities, and, specifically, degree programs and research that would support local economies.

The “Land Grant Act” significantly bolstered the Flagship University movement. Without excluding “classical studies,” or military training, and emerging scientific fields, the subsequent largess provided funding, “to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, in such manner as the legislatures of the States may respectively prescribe, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.” In accepting the funding from Washington, states and their universities were required to have education and research programs configured to promote agriculture, mining, and civil engineering -- fields vital to the nation’s economy.

National Leading Universities – the Past as Present?

The United States was not alone in desiring universities with a utilitarian purpose. The notion, if not the title, of the Flagship University emerged in other parts of the world. In England, for example, Jeremy Bentham articulated the concepts of individual freedom and the need for English society to build public institutions that were utilitarian, secular, and egalitarian. Established in 1826, University College London espoused many of Bentham’s ideas, becoming the first university in England to be entirely

secular, admitting students regardless of their religion and gender. But within the landscape of British universities, University College's charter was unique.

Much later, England developed a set of "civic" universities that espoused similar egalitarian ideals. These included Birmingham University in 1900, followed by Liverpool in 1903, Manchester in 1903, Leeds in 1904, Sheffield in 1905, and Bristol in 1909. Each was founded in cities experiencing a boom in commerce, trade, and industry. England's existing set of universities and colleges was distinctly elitist, reinforcing an existing rigid social class structure, and seemingly far removed from the educational needs of these emerging commercial centers. Business interests merged with civic leaders to build, fund, and support these new institutions; they admitted largely sons of merchants and bankers, and focused on providing students with "real-world" skills such as in engineering, medicine, law, and business (Eggins 2014).

Later these "civic" universities, bound to a specific city, became known as "red-bricks" as they were relatively new, compared to the ancients in Oxford and Cambridge. They, along with a group of colleges that called themselves polytechnics that focused on utilitarian fields such as military engineering, marked an important innovation, but distinctly less progressive or as broad a vision of purpose as the public universities in America. They offered training, but little applied or developmental research or the range of public engagement and active involvement in local economies that were essential roles of the great publics in states like Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Texas, California, and Washington.

There are other national examples of universities established and nurtured to be, in some form, transformative institutions. There is a long history of chartering Latin American universities to improve the socioeconomic conditions of their respective nations—what is termed their "social mission." Often written in the midst of their postcolonial transition, these mission statements tended to focus on cultural preservation and enhancement, socioeconomic access, and, as stated in the charter for the Universidad de Buenos Aires, paying "particular attention to Argentina's problems," or in the case of Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México founded in its modern form in 1910, to "conduct research primarily on national problems and spread as widely as possible the benefits of culture."

Similar language can be found in the chartering of major public universities in the United States. The University of California's charter of 1868 included the charge, "A general diffusion of knowledge and intelligence being essential to the preservation of the rights and liberties of the people, the Legislature shall encourage by all suitable means the promotion of intellectual, scientific, moral, and agricultural improvement." In the admission of students, the criterion was secular (religion being one of the great divides in early American society), with wide geographic representation, and, soon after its founding, open equally to women—although with ingrained biases on what studies they could pursue.

The University of Michigan, for example, was to provide an "uncommon education to the common man," as stated by its president Henry Tappan; and the University of Wisconsin, along with most other state universities chartered in mid-1800s, saw that its ultimate mission was to serve every corner of the state and every citizen in some way. And in both the United States and Latin America, the leading public universities were, at some point, also granted significant levels of autonomy—at least in law, if not always in practice. But the desire and rhetoric of a larger social and economic role in nation building in Latin America was generally louder than the actual effect. With a few exceptions, the major public and Catholic universities in Latin America focused narrowly on access and, to some degree, social programs, and less on the broader role of research that benefited economic development that characterizes the history of America's major public universities.

Most leading national universities in various parts of the world have been traditionally highly selective in their admissions, employing among the best scholars, and serving as the primary path for creating a nation's civic elites – often replicating or reinforcing the existing social structure and helping the privileged remain so. These leading universities have, historically, been grounded in a form of national service, but with a very limited vision of their role in socioeconomic mobility, economic development, and public service. There was, until relatively recently, little external pressure and internal desire to change. One thinks of the University of Tokyo, Peking University and Seoul National University in East Asia, and on a smaller scale their counterparts in Southeast Asia and South Asia, all largely fitting the mold of what I call the *Traditional Flagship Universities*. The same can be said of the great European universities. Even as national governments pushed to expand access to higher education—the process of massification—these leading national universities sometimes seem stuck in time.

The Flagship University nomenclature has been used in various parts of the world, but never with a clear and commonly held sense of its definition or meaning. In the post-World War II era and into the 1960s, the South Korean government established what it called "Flagship National Universities" in each of its eight provinces and two independent cities. In this era of nation building, and for a time in the midst of the Korean War, most of these institutions were the result of mergers of existing, smaller regional colleges. Today, each of these ten institutions have medical schools and like other designated national universities in

Asia, they have the most competitive entrance exams. As noted, there was no clear description of what a Flagship University should be in Korea and the term was no longer used after about 1968.

Some European nations, in particular Hungary after the end of communist rule, explored using the Flagship title to distinguish a number of its leading universities. But an inherent political and organizational challenge of designating one or more existing institutions as a leading and perhaps favored university, particularly within the context of a national system with politically powerful universities with equal claim on public funding, essentially ended the reform drive. The need for mission differentiation, where a select few truly research-intensive universities are adequately funded, is now widely understood by ministries and those who study higher education systems to be important. Yet achieving this, either through government directive as originally attempted in Hungary, or indirectly by competitive and selective funding of certain institutions, is politically difficult.

In more recent decades, leading national universities have undergone a metamorphosis, pushed by increasing expectations for a much more expanded role in society and the competitive needs of national economies. A research project based at the University of Oslo's Centre for European Studies uses the Flagship title to explore how some European universities are adapting to the demands of ministries and businesses to become more engaged in economic development and social inclusion. In that project, funded by the Research Council of Norway, the investigators state that a Flagship University "is defined as a comprehensive research-intensive university, located in one of its country's largest urban areas . . . [that is] in general among the oldest and largest institutions for higher learning of its country."¹ The project explored the activities and goals of a variety of existing departments in some 11 northern European universities—in essence, an inductive approach in which case studies will help define what it means to be a Flagship University. At the heart of the analysis: a profound sense of the range and nature of activities that major research university are now pursuing compared to only ten or so years ago.

Another example of the use of the Flagship moniker is a project focused on collecting data and supporting the development of eight sub-Saharan African universities by the Centre for Higher Education Transformation. Based in Cape Town, researchers at CHET have used the Flagship title to help outline the current vibrancy, goals, and challenges facing these institutions. Under the title the Higher Education Research and Advocacy Network in Africa (HERANA), the project initially pursued the hard work of gathering comparative data among the universities and, via a collaborative mode, outlined the idea of the need for an Academic Core of variables—for example, student-to-faculty ratios, goals, the percentage of faculty with doctoral degrees, and correlations necessary for top-tier national universities to pursue institutional improvement.²

It is clear from these examples that the Flagship University title means different things to different people, and is often influenced by national context. Internationally, it is only now coming into vogue as a term familiar to academics as well as ministerial leaders. But a competing and much more dominant paradigm is the rhetoric of the World Class University (WCU) that is almost exclusively identified with global university rankings with their myopic focus on research output and selective markers of reputation.

While the pursuit of improved rankings and a claim to WCU status continues as seemingly the primary goal for many universities in all parts of the globe, there has been a growing debate about the value and feasibility of this vision. Scholars and university leaders are critiquing this model and seeking more creative ways to look at the role of teaching, community service, and scholarship in higher education.

The Notion of Flagship Universities as Evolving Institutions

Leading national universities are now more important for socioeconomic mobility, for producing economic and civic leaders, for knowledge production, and for pushing innovation and societal self-reflection than in any other time in their history. Their modern evolution has been an iterative process of external and internal forces, marked by the movement from elite to mass higher education, from institutions primarily concerned with teaching to increased focus on creating knowledge, with economic engagement, and providing a growing array of public services; from relatively high levels of government subsidies to relatively low public funding support in many parts of the world; from relatively high levels of institutional autonomy and isolation to much closer ties to stakeholder demands, including complex accountability regimes; from institutions with regional or national orientations and distinct academic cultures, to the aspiration to be global players and significant convergence in management structures and organizational behaviors.

One result: leading public research-intensive universities of today are very different from their past counterparts. These institutions are constantly expanding their activities in reaction to societal demands, generating new avenues of research and discovery, and expanding their reach into most aspects of modern life. And with globalization and increasing expectations by government, by the private sector, and by society in general, organizational reforms are accelerating. In the face of the dominant WCU and ranking paradigm, most academic leaders and their academic communities have had difficulty conceptualizing, and

articulating, their grander purpose and multiple engagements with society. Some seem to wait for the next ministerial edict to help or push them toward greater societal relevancy – often focused on improved global rankings.

But there are limits to the effectiveness of government and ministerial interventions into the operation of their universities. Most universities within Asia, and within Europe and elsewhere, have had weak internal cultures of accountability and management. Government driven interventions and funding incentives have pushed much needed reforms in much of the world. But ultimately, Flagship universities in this new era of human development need to have greater control and build their own internal academic culture and efforts focused on institutional self-improvement.

The New Flagship University Model

In the book *The New Flagship University*, I attempt to update the idea of a national leading university, and to outline a holistic picture of its many responsibilities and activities and academic culture, in part reflecting on the most successful institutions found throughout the world. The *New Flagship* model purposefully provides an alternative conceptual approach to the rather vague World Class University paradigm that now dominates much of the international discussion.

Yet my goal is even more ambitious: to support an institutional culture among a select group of institutions that is self-identified or formally so by national or even regional governments, and is firmly rooted in their national and regional relevancy.

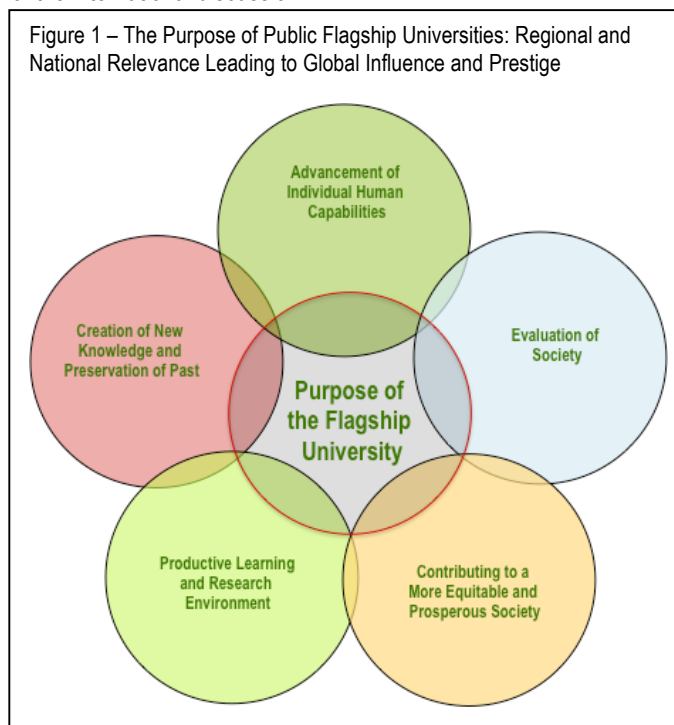
Figure 1 captures the larger purpose and objectives of *Flagship* Universities, with only one element that is valued and partially captured in the current crop of global and national rankings: the creation of new knowledge. Different types of universities throughout the world share these objectives. Yet, they have a special meaning for the modern reincarnation of the *Flagship University*.

Outlining the objectives of these institutions is simply a reference point to a larger, and more challenging, question: What is the path to becoming a New Flagship University or, for those campuses that already see themselves as having such a status, for expanding on the model?

The logical sequential route is from regional/national engagement, then to global influence. There probably is no shortcut. Hence, one might postulate that a WCU, defined largely by data on research productivity, does not make a *Flagship*. At the same time, a *Flagship* is more likely to be a WCU, providing the necessary environment for high-quality research productivity, but not at the expense of the larger public purpose and the soul of the university enterprise.

The book explores pathways for universities to re-shape or expand their historic mission and academic culture, and to pursue organizational features intended to increase their relevancy in the societies that give them life and purpose. In this quest, international standards of excellence focused largely on research productivity are not ignored, but are framed as only one goal towards supporting a university's productivity and larger social purpose—not as an end unto itself. A *New Flagship University* “profile” is organized in four categories or realms of policies and practices. Each relates to the institution's external responsibilities and internal operations, including a *Flagship University's* place in national systems of higher education; the expanse of programs and activities related to their “core” mission of teaching and learning and research; old and new notions of public service and approaches to regional and national economic development; and governance, management, and internally derived accountability practices that form a foundation for the *New Flagship* model.

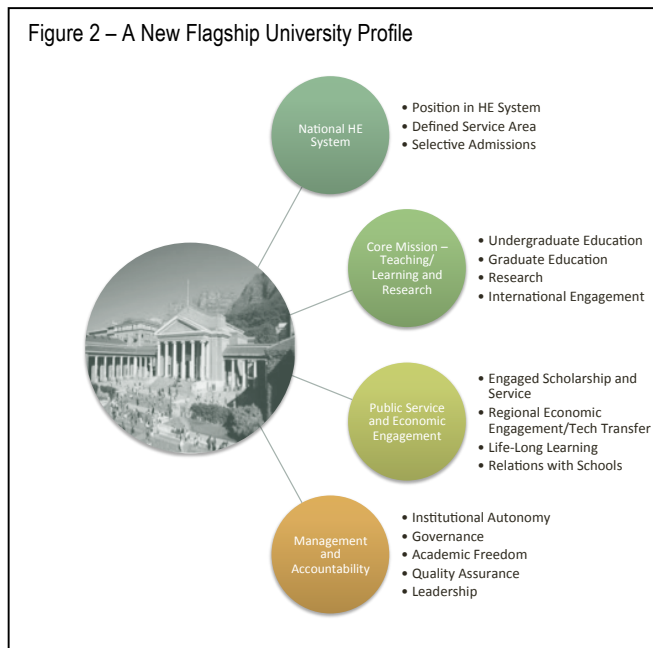
Each policy realm includes examples of policies and best practices at leading national universities. One important theme is that the path to increased research productivity, and improved rankings is not through surgical efforts to boost faculty journal publications, patents, and licenses. Rather it requires a more holistic approach to shaping the mission, academic culture, and practices of a university to, in essence, take care of the fundamentals outlined in the *New Flagship* model.



Another theme is that ministerial directives and efforts to force quality improvement and greater productivity, a legitimate concern for all national governments, have limits for expanding the overall social and economic impact of their universities. Ultimately, it will be the internal academic culture and efforts to seek institutional self-improvement that will determine which universities have a greater local, regional, national, and global impact.

The list of policy and practices is not meant as a litmus test for achieving the status of the *New Flagship University*. Many universities are already fully engaged in many of the characteristics and programs featured in the model. And not all universities, for example, will view the wide range of public and community service practices described as relevant within their national culture and societal needs.

Resource constraints add another extremely important variable. The existing academic culture of faculty adds yet another constraint along with issues related to management capacity, and the larger political and economic environment in which universities operate.



International Assessments of the New Flagship Model

In their assessment of the *New Flagship* model for African higher education, Amasa P. Ndofirepi and Micheal Cross, note that, “In their pursuit of competitiveness, higher education institutions across Africa set themselves the target of becoming ‘world class’, and labels such as a ‘world-class African university’ are not uncommon in their mission statements.” The authors see greater value in the *New Flagship* identity, “Transcending world-class criteria, flagship institutions, according to Douglass, identify with local needs as they are broadly engaged in regional and national economic development and public service across all the disciplines, in order to justify their sufficiently autonomous public financing.” And they conclude: “Without being overly selective, we propose the possibility of strengthening a few existing, fully established universities in each country to pursue the flagship model, on condition that they prioritise African interests in order to become an authentic African university.”³

Reflecting on the *New Flagship* model and its adoption in Asia, Phan Le Ha has written that it is more than, “just blue-sky thinking but a solid concept that governments and countries would find useful to adopt to reform their higher education systems and deliberate over their future.”⁴ But it is also important to note the importance of cultural, financial, and organizational differences among Asian nations, and throughout the world.

The *Flagship* model has a number of major assumptions, including that national and regional higher education systems have significant levels of mission differentiation among institutions and a place for only a select number of truly leading or *yi liu* universities; that there is a significant level of policy and practice convergence, and best practices that can be adopted to different national cultures and traditions; and that universities can manage their evolution if given enough autonomy and sufficient levels of academic freedom.

The political, economic, and cultural peculiarities may make such assumptions a non-reality in many nations – for now. Such was the conclusion for a number of the authors who contributed chapters to the *New Flagship University* book focused on the role of leading national universities in Latin America, Russia, and Asia. They noted that the biggest obstacles lay often in inadequate public funding models, the incalcitrant civil service mentality of faculty, severely inadequate university governance and management structures, mounting governmental controls and, often, political dynamics that make universities inordinately subject to political movements and encroachments.⁵ But all the authors also understood the *New Flagship* concept as aspirational—essentially a guide and reference point for what was desirable and needed to help shape the discourse in their respective regions. National higher education systems in Asia and elsewhere are rapidly changing. Many academic leaders and some ministries are beginning to understand that the bell-curve approach of rankings and the research dominant notion of WCU are no longer adequate to help guide policy, funding, and practice.

A recent conference at Zhejiang University co-sponsored by the East-West Center (based in Honolulu) gathered a group of higher education scholars with expertise in various countries in Asia to also assess the value of the *New Flagship University* model. This will result in a book that explores the *Flagship* notion in its modern reincarnation and present best practices and innovations that leading universities in the Pacific Rim are pursuing.

Finally, it is important to note that the *New Flagship* model is not a rejection of global rankings of universities. Ranking products are here to stay, with good and bad consequences. They are a useful international benchmark for ministries and universities, and for students who seek a means to unpack the growing market of higher education providers. The problem is, to reiterate, they represent a very narrow band of what it means to be a leading university within a region, within a nation, and in turn globally. Strategic initiatives by national governments, and by university leaders, are getting lost in the weeds of rankings and the rhetoric of World Class. My hope is that the *New Flagship* model provides a path for some universities to explain and seek a revised institutional identity, to help them build a stronger internal culture of self-improvement and, ultimately, a greater contribution to the economic development and socioeconomic mobility rates that all societies seek. But for that to happen, some groups of institutions will need to embrace some version of the model on their own terms and articulate it clearly.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Based at the ARENA Centre for European Studies at the University of Oslo, the research project is titled European Flagship Universities: Balancing Academic Excellence and Social Relevance. See: www.sv.uio.no/arena/english/research/projects/Flagship/.
- ² The HERANA project is supported by funding by the Ford Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation and includes the University of Botswana, Cape Town, Dares Salaam Tanzania, Eduardo Mondlane University Mozambique, University of Ghana, Makerere University Uganda, Mauritius, and the University of Nairobi Kenya. Beyond developing comparative data and analysis, it has the goal as, "to disseminate the findings of the research projects, better co-ordinate existing sources of information on higher education in Africa, develop a media strategy, and put in place a policy dialogue via seminars and information technology that facilitates interactions between researchers, institutional leaders and decision-makers." See www.chet.org.za/programmes/herana/
- ³ Amasa P Ndofirepi and Michael Cross, "World-class or flagship – Which way for universities?" *University World News*, 21 October 2016 Issue No:183: <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20161021131912480>; see also Damtew Teferra, "Flagship universities – Enrolment, typology, graduates," *University World News*, 16 January 2016 Global Edition Issue 396: <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20160115172324411&query=Flagship+Universities>
- ⁴ Phan Le Ha, "A realistic model for international universities," *University World News*, 22 January 2016 Global Edition Issue 397.
- ⁵ In an article in *University World News*, Elizabeth Balbachevsky discussed New Flagship University model as a window for discussing the strengths and weaknesses of leading university in Brazil, and in particular the University of Sao Palo (USP): "Its reputation is also acknowledged at the international level: the last QS World University Rankings by Subject evaluated 36 areas in more than 3,500 universities. In this exercise, USP's programmes were positioned among the top 50 in eight areas, and the programmes from another 21 areas were in the top 100. In spite of its scientific and academic achievements, and even considering its relevant roles at regional level, USP's social performance lags behind what one would expect from a new flagship university. . . What is the missing link that prevents USP from fulfilling the role of a new flagship university? I would like to advocate that its main problems arise from its governance processes. . . this unrestricted autonomy coupled with the lack of a clear and independent voice coming from outside make the university deaf to societal demands and expectations, and leave the rector and the senior administration hostage to internal power struggles. This situation, combined with the politicisation of university life, prevents the university from performing a real flagship role, providing leadership and actively searching for collaboration with other higher education institutions. If it was able to fulfill this role it would be able to play a strategic role in supporting the country towards greater social and economic development." Elizabeth Balbachevsky, "Academically excellent, but deaf to society's needs," *University World News*, 29 January 2016 Global Edition Issue 398