

Introduction



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Seeking an Alternative Narrative

It is a familiar if not fully explained paradigm. A World Class University (WCU) is supposed to perform highly influential research, embody a culture of excellence, have great facilities, and retain a brand name that transcends national borders. But perhaps, most importantly, the particular institution needs to sit in the upper echelons of one or more world rankings generated each year by nonprofit and commercial enterprises. That is the ultimate proof for many government ministers and for much of the global higher education community. But is this an accurate way to gauge the value, breadth of activities, and societal impact of the best universities?

International university rankings are fixated on a narrow band of data and prestige scores. Citation indexes are biased toward the sciences and engineering, biased in their focus on peer-reviewed journals published mostly in English, on the number of Nobel laureates and other markers of academic status, and tilted toward a select group of largely older universities that always rank high in surveys of prestige.

These indicators are useful and informative, supplying a global and comparative measure of productivity and status. Yet government ministries are placing too much faith in a paradigm that is not achievable, that often fails to value the broader activities and outputs of many universities, and that loses sight of the economic and socioeconomic mobility needs of their countries. They aim for some subset of their national universities to inch up the scale of this or that ranking by building accountability systems and “excellence” programs that influence the behavior of university leaders, and, ultimately, faculty. Some of this is good. These ministerial initiatives create incentives to reshape the internal culture of some national university systems that have weak internal quality and accountability policies and practices. Their global pervasiveness reflects a frustration with

the academic research achievement of higher education institutions. There also is a profound distrust among most ministries about the ability of their major national universities to elevate their performance without significant external pressure and, often, interventions. In most nations, the academic community has rarely articulated a vision of how their national systems should develop, or how their institutions might best serve the societies that created and sustains them financially. Until recently, many universities showed little interest in self-induced organizational reforms—for example, moving away from civil service as opposed to merit-based approaches to faculty advancement. Arguably, they needed a push from their respective ministries.

Yet, it is also clear that rankings have become the proxy and guide for institutional productivity. The ubiquitous efforts of ministries, and now many universities, to pursue higher rankings have detrimental consequences—in essence, establishing incentives focused largely on increasing the quantity of research production at the expense of other vitally important functions of a major national university.

In the following section of this book, I attempt to advocate and describe the notion of the New Flagship University as a more relevant ideal—a model that builds on past traditions and roles of leading national universities. This updated vision of the Flagship University is not simply an institution with some of the best students, the best faculty, high research output, and claim on public financing. That older, limited view of a leading national university is more appropriately called a Traditional Flagship University—institutions that have been grounded in national service, but historically with a limited vision of their role in socioeconomic mobility, economic development, and public service, and without the devotion to institutional self-improvement that marks the world's best and most influential universities.

The New Flagship model is much more expansive, providing an updated vision of the role, practices, and activities relevant to a contemporary world where knowledge production is rapidly advancing, and the needs and demands of society are more complex and urgent than in the past. The intent is to help steer leading universities, and their ministries, beyond the confines of rankings and myopic desires for WCU status. The Flagship model does not ignore international standards of excellence focused on research productivity, yet it is grounded in national and regional service, and has a specific set of characteristics and responsibilities that, admittedly, do not lend themselves easily to ranking regimes.

The Flagship paradigm is also built on an important proposition. After a long period of ministries attempting to shape the mission and activities

of universities, including various accountability schemes and demands focused on the normative WCU model, we need to enter a period in which institutions themselves gain greater autonomy and financial ability to create, build, and sustain internal cultures of self-improvement and evidence-based management. The great challenge for the network of universities that are truly leaders in their own national systems of higher education is to more overtly shape and pronounce their own missions and, ultimately, to meaningfully increase their role in the societies that gave them life and purpose. The New Flagship University profiled in the following narrative is intended as a construct for this cause. It reflects the activities of many leading universities, and is aspirational and open to adoption and interpretation.

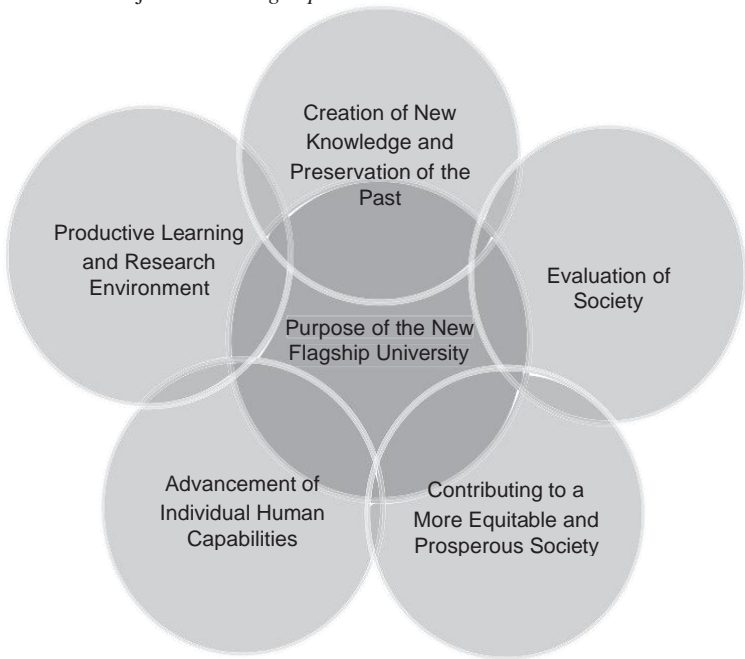
It is important to note that top-ranked research-intensive universities, particularly the public universities in the United States, were not built on a narrow band of quantitative measures of research productivity or reputational surveys that characterizes the contemporary crop of international rankings. And while influenced at the margin by these rankings, their path to national and international relevance was, and continues to be, rooted in their larger socioeconomic purpose and internal practices. In summary, and to offer an initial sketch, Flagship's often have some combination of the following descriptives:

- ⌘ Comprehensive Institutions—These institutions are generally comprehensive and research-intensive, focused on regional and national relevancy. This does not exclude institutions focused almost entirely on science and technology, for example, but they have more limited abilities to fully embrace the Flagship model.
- ⌘ Broadly Accessible—These institutions are highly selective in admissions at the undergraduate and graduate levels, yet they also are broadly accessible so as to be representative of the socioeconomic and racial/ethnic demography of a country. Flagship universities have a commitment to promote socioeconomic mobility and reduce inequality in the societies they serve and, at the same time, attract and retain talented students, and faculty, from across the world. These are not incompatible goals—indeed, they are the hallmarks of the most productive universities; but they do require sufficient enrollment and program capacity.
- ⌘ Educating the Next Generation of Leaders—Flagship universities are intent on educating and providing talented leaders, generally for the regional and national societies they serve, as well as on enhancing engagement with the larger and increasingly international world.

- ⌘ Highly Autonomous—These institutions are sufficiently autonomous and publicly financed so that they become leaders of knowledge generation and thought, not just followers. This is admittedly hard to define; yet I offer some practical policy realms related to governance and other management aspects of Flagship Universities.
- ⌘ Management Capacity—These institutions have an internal culture of evidence-based management that includes the constant search for institutional self-improvement built on internally generated quality assurance, which, ultimately, cannot be achieved by ministerial policies and directives alone.
- ⌘ Economic Engagement—These institutions are broadly engaged in regional/national economic development and public service across all the disciplines, with participation by faculty, students, and staff, and organizational support by the institution. Most universities have various activities intended to boost economic development and to integrate students and faculty into community-based research and service. But for many leading national universities, this is a relatively new pursuit, sometimes referred to as a novel “third mission” not yet fully valued by an academic culture slow to adapt to a wider definition of the purpose of their institution. Flagships view this form of engagement as a core mission, and have or are in the process of integrating these efforts into a broader institutional strategy.
- ⌘ Leaders in a Larger Higher Education System—These universities have a self-identity as part of a larger system of national/regional education. In this system, Flagships can provide policies, practices, and collaborations that influence the behaviors of other postsecondary institutions in their regions and in their nations, and in other ways become more connected to the larger national education system. Too many leading universities view themselves as islands, focused on their own productivity and prestige in isolation.

These characteristics are not sufficient unto themselves to describe the New Flagship University model. A more detailed exploration and reflection on the model is offered later in this narrative. Rather, they offer an initial sketch.

Figure I.1 captures the larger purpose and objectives of Flagship Universities, with only one 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.

Figure I.1 The Objectives of *Flagship Universities*.

Source: John Aubrey Douglass. Center for Studies in Higher Education—UC Berkeley.

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.

Before more fully venturing into the model, including goals, policies, practices, activities, and outputs, it is important to explore more fully the dynamics of the rising interest in global rankings and the notion of a WCU. What are its benefits and costs on the behaviors and success of universities and national higher education systems? Is there room for an alternative or a complementary narrative?

