The New Flagship University

Changing the Paradigm from Global Ranking to National Relevancy

JOHN AUBREY DOUGLASS
In the course of many centuries, universities have survived revolutions, coups, wars, famines, reformations, societal reengineering, and economic depression. In one fashion or another, they remain. Their nearest rival in longevity: the Catholic Church. And this has occurred despite numerous predictions of obsolesces and doom—witness management guru Peter Drucker’s prediction in the 1990s that bricks-and-mortar universities and colleges would soon find themselves in the dust heap of history, brought to an end by the assumption of cheaper forms of providing “educational services.” We are still waiting.

Today, universities exist within an increasingly diversified and growing market of higher education providers, shaped by growing worldwide enrollment demand and the insatiable need for new knowledge. There is little prospect for the development of a singular form of higher education.

At the same time, universities continue to evolve, increasing their value to the societies they were created to serve. 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. 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 focused 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; 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: research-intensive universities of today are very different from the leading national universities of the past. And with globalization and increasing expectations by government, by the private sector, and by society in general, organizational reforms are accelerating.
Within the pantheon of a growing number of postsecondary institutions, this book argues that there is a place, indeed a need, for a group of leading national universities with specific characteristics. As defined in the following chapters, the New Flagship University model is not simply a leading national university, with historical links to preserving socioeconomic castes and elite paths to power, with the best students, the best faculty, and the first claim on resources. Most countries have these institutions, what my coauthors and I call a Traditional Flagship University to help differentiate the old from the new.

As profiled in this book, the New Flagship University is a more comprehensive institution in the range of its activities and in its self-identified social purpose. Regional and national relevance is a primary goal of its academic leaders and faculty; global rankings are a secondary concern. International engagement, in its various forms, and increased journal publication and other markers of research productivity, are valued, yet they are framed as a path toward this larger purpose—not as an end unto itself. Flagships also seek to more overtly shape their own destinies.

In much of the world, ministries are the most significant driver of reforms within universities via new resources and sometimes intrusive accountability regimes. The great challenge for the network of universities that are truly leaders in their national systems of higher education is to more overtly shape and articulate their own missions, build their internal processes aimed toward excellence in all of their endeavors, and, ultimately, to meaningfully increase their role in the societies that gave them life and purpose.

What drives much of the current waves of ministerial edicts and funding? One cause is the sense that their universities are not productive enough, in research and in their influence in socioeconomic mobility and economic development—opinions shaped mightily by relatively new benchmarks provided by global rankings of universities. Within a vacuum of other sources of information, this has led to a contemporary infatuation with rankings, and its offspring: the notion of a World Class University (WCU). Ranking regimes and WCU s are nearly one and the same. Both are characterized by a focus on a narrow band of internationally recognized indicators of research productivity. The realization that Russia, or France, or Germany, or China, did not have a top-ranked university caused immense anxiety and a subsequent search for government-formulated solutions. To be without a globally ranked university is now viewed as a distinct disadvantage in the new knowledge economy. National pride also plays a role.

As discussed in the first section of this book, the aspirational model of the New Flagship University is, in part, a reaction to this myopic yet powerful
vision of what leading universities should do and achieve. University leaders, faculty, and ministerial agents need an alternative narrative. This book attempts this feat by providing a profile of the New Flagship University.

Four “realms” of policy and practice are discussed, 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 provides examples of policies and best practices—from the conceptual idea of engaged learning, to research and public-service goals and their integration into faculty advancement, approaches to technology transfer, and models of internal governance and management.

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 New Flagship model is an attempt not only to provide a coherent framework toward development and change, but also to communicate the mission of leading research-intensive universities to a wider public. Admittedly, this is an ambitious goal—one with many flaws, and with only brief descriptions of the many facets and nuances explored in each of the policy realms.

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. In much of the world, there is a limited pool of faculty
with the PhD, for example, and there are major challenges related to effective university management. As discussed in the Flagship profile section of the book, and in the chapters by contributing authors who focus on various regions of the world, the level of autonomy, governance structure, and management capacity, and the alignment of an institution’s academic culture, are key factors for pursuing institutional self-improvement.

Taking these national and academic culture variables into account, the idea is that the Flagship model is aspirational, adoptable, and waiting for greater definition and expansion. Whether it will be powerful enough to attract adherents is, of course, an open question.

The first part of the book concludes with a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the New Flagship model, the contextual aspects that may determine its relevance in various parts of the globe, and an attempt to answer predicted questions—for instance, is it most relevant in developing or developed economies? Is it simply a matter of institutional self-identity or ministerial selection? This forms a transition to Part 2 of the book.

The five chapters that then follow are written by observers of global efforts to reform and reposition higher education in nation-states. Each provides a historical and contemporary window into the leading universities within their own particular country or region of the world, which they know intimately. One important question posed to each author: to what extent is the New Flagship University model relevant in Asia, in Russia, in South America, and in the Scandinavian region? Another is the extent to which global university ranking regimes, and the World Class imagery, are influencing national policy making and institutional behaviors.

In each nation or region of the world discussed, there are significant efforts at university reform and also particular political cultures, economic capabilities, and demographic shifts. John Hawkins has extensive experience and knowledge on higher education in Asia. He offers observations on what he calls the “rapidly changing ecology of higher education in the region.” Ministries and universities continue to look externally for models and inspiration, with an increasing domination of rankings and vague notions of becoming World Class.

Hawkins (Director of the Center for International Development Education at UCLA, and the former editor of Comparative Education Review, among many other positions) observes a “predicament.” University leaders in Asia are increasingly concerned with meeting, in some form, the objectives outlined in the New Flagship model—although, again, this is a relatively new nomenclature. The push toward research productivity draws leading universities away from spending resources where the impact on local and national communities might be greatest. Yet, he sees an eventual maturation for institutions that have undergone rapid growth in
enrollment and programs, and that the larger ideals of the Flagship model can coexist with their World Class desires.

In their retrospective on the role of leading national universities in Russia, Isak Froumin and Oleg Leshukov trace their transformation from a set of elite universities before the revolution into the Soviet network of institutions. This included Specialized Sectorial institutions largely focused on serving the labor needs of a specific industry under a command economy model; Regional Infrastructure Universities focused on professional programs—like teacher training and medicine—under a strict national curricular framework that served a region; and what they call Soviet Flagship Universities—the Russian version of the Traditional Flagship.

Under this coherent structure of higher education, the Soviet Flagships provided a wide range of academic degrees; they had the primary responsibility to train future faculty and Soviet government leaders and to be centers for furthering Soviet ideology. Each region had a mix of all of institutions described: Specialized Sectorial, Regional Infrastructure, and a Soviet Flagship. Some Soviet Flagships, however, were more equal than others. A small group had special status and influence, including Moscow State University and Saint Petersburg University. Under the Soviet model, basic academic research in the sciences and technology became largely the purview of researchers at the Russian Academy of Science.

The Soviet higher education system was a very powerful conceptual model that fit the needs of the state and influenced other communist countries within Russia’s sphere of political influence, notably China. The post–Cold War shift in Russia, explain Froumin and Leshukov, meant another dramatic shift in this system.

The path to a quasi-market economy led to a changed conception of the role of leading national universities. Under federal government policies beginning in the 1990s, selected leading universities gained the ability to set their own educational degree requirements and to develop admission criteria beyond the national examination. They also gained a larger role in basic research once largely reserved for the Academy of Science—a difficult transition for faculty. This led to a period of experimentation that the authors view as often chaotic; universities now competed for students in a period of declining demand, and with academic cultures still stuck largely in a civil-service mentality. Government policy also came to value international comparisons in research productivity and practices, and in the organization of major research-intensive universities, leading to a restructuring of the higher education system. This included a massive wave of institutional mergers and later a series of “excellence” programs to elevate a core set of universities to higher rankings and World Class
status. Greater international engagement has become a cornerstone of these efforts providing a path to greater interaction with the world exposure to practices that may improve research productivity and the quality of degree programs.

While government policies, and pressure, focus on higher rankings, Froumin and Leshukov recognize that the larger ambitions and framework of the New Flagship model should be the larger goal. But they see significant challenges for Russia’s leading national universities to adopt a more expansive mission. Froumin has a unique perspective on Russian higher education, and on education in other parts of the globe, having worked at the World Bank when it first began to push the idea of World Class Universities.

Andrés Bernasconi and Daniela Véliz trace the historical development of national universities in Chile, and more generally in Latin America. The founding of many universities in this region of the world incorporated broad mandates intended to shape national cultures, educate future government officials, and help organize political institutions and national systems of education—a process of postcolonial state building. By the twentieth century, the Universidad de Buenos Aires, Universidad de San Carlos in Guatemala, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, and the Universidad de Chile, among others, emerged with these assigned roles.

In their stated mission, they had similarities with their American public university counterparts. However, they remained largely the vassals of the societal elite, with limited capacity for research and without a strong sense of their role in socioeconomic mobility and economic development. Those larger objectives—often referred to as a “third mission” in many parts of the world, connoting a sense of a new role—are now drawing the interest of national ministries and university leaders. Rankings, and the World Class prestige, are a concern, providing benchmarking that indicates generally low research productivity—with some notable exceptions. But the policy debates in nations such as Chile are more focused on how the leading national universities, public and private, both of which receive government funding, can more effectively expand access equitably, and to a lesser extent engage in promoting technological innovation and boost local economies.

Bernasconi and Véliz view the New Flagship model as a useful guide. But they also see major challenges. Universities are not adequately funded, for one. One result: most universities have very large enrollments and high student-to-faculty ratios. In Chile and in other parts of Latin America, with exceptions in Brazil, governments are reluctant to create different levels of funding for different universities. Spreading few resources among many universities creates mediocrity. The low proportion of faculty with
doctorates is also a factor that inhibits research productivity and the building of quality graduate programs.

Governance and institutional management capacity are also extremely weak. Strategic decision making and opportunities for innovation are rare. This is partially due to the structure of governance in most Latin American universities. Rectors are often elected and have limited authority regarding resource allocations. Faculty are a significant conservative influence, wedded to a civil-service mentality that allocates power to senior and often unproductive faculty.

There are exceptions and examples of innovative and emerging Flagships in Latin America, but in the view of the authors, most of the leading national universities in the continent and up the isthmus stand in contrast to their counterparts in other key regions of the world. Without a major effort on the part of these universities to redefine themselves, the Flagship model is “more of a benchmark than a realized ideal in Latin America.”

Bjorn Stensaker and Tatiana Fumasoli explore the world of Scandinavian universities, focusing their attention on the University of Copenhagen, the University of Oslo, and Stockholm University. In many parts of the world, universities, and their faculty, they observe, have norms and hierarchies that are resistant to growing societal and government demands for greater relevancy. Yet, they see a particular Scandinavian culture that is different. While national governments in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden have followed a familiar neoliberal path to more specific demands for outputs and less overt steering, this has not led simply to a network of competing institutions removed from larger societal needs, but to greater coordination among institutions regarding their individual roles in an expanded mission to shape Scandinavian countries. This has also created room for the leading national universities examined to seek innovation, fueled in part by government resource allocations and cooperation. “We observe that Scandinavian Flagship Universities operate on a two-fold level,” the authors explain: “a systemic level, which is mainly national but also regional; and an international level where they endeavor as single academic organizations in a competitive arena, pursuing excellence and prestige through research and ranking.”

Stensaker and Fumasoli also attribute a culture of cooperation to the relatively small size of each country. Combined with robust funding provided by robust economies that depend on international trade, Scandinavian Flagships seek collaborations inside and outside their borders in a manner that strengthens academic productivity, and makes them more strategic actors in supporting regional communities. For these reasons, they view the universities in their case study as largely fulfilling and the New Flagship model.
In her epilogue, Manja Klemenèiè states the desirability of the New Flagship profile, but also notes the need to explore pathways by which campuses might debate and revise their missions, policies, and practices. How much will this be a bottom-up deliberative process that includes faculty, students, and administrative staff, and how much is it a campus leadership issue, and even a ministerial-influenced process? If the New Flagship model is to have an impact on the behaviors of universities, this is an essential and complicated topic that is not fully discussed in this volume—what Klemenèiè describes as perhaps the second-phase conversation for exploring the pursuit of the New Flagship ideal.

John Aubrey Douglass
Center for Studies in Higher Education
University of California—Berkeley