

# **WHAT IS A WORLD CLASS UNIVERSITY?**

## A LITERATURE REVIEW



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In charting the emergence of world class as a descriptor of higher education institutions, it is important to highlight the notion of a world class university isn't strictly a modern phenomenon. The reputation of the world's leading universities has long transcended sovereign borders. However, in more recent history, the increasing connectedness and transnational fluidity of higher education systems has changed the landscape for all universities, not just a few. Rightly or wrongly, all universities are now defined not simply within the context of national borders, but on a global level. In this regard, understanding what it means to be world class appears particularly central to the future visions and strategies of higher education establishments across the globe.

This short literature review does not intend to arrive at an objective definition of what a world class university looks like, but seeks to disseminate the theoretical and academic underpinnings of Elementa Leadership's own understanding and thinking of what makes a world class university. Ultimately this is a subjective judgement.

The institutional resonance and contextual significance of a world class university is perhaps most notably governed by a drive (some would say a pragmatic requirement) to 'compete in a global tertiary education marketplace' (Salmi, 2009: 15). If one accepts that the need to compete is now a prerequisite of global higher education institutions then the concept of a world class university is perhaps best regarded as the neo-liberal catchall of modern day higher education policy discourse.

*With students looking to attend the best possible institution that they can afford, often regardless of national borders, and with governments keen on maximizing the returns on their investments in universities, global standing is becoming increasingly important concern for institutions around the world (Salmi, 2009: 15)*

In 'an age of academic hype' (Altbach, 2003: 5) there is a sense that the term world class university has become increasingly used as marketing rhetoric for higher education institutions without justification in terms of teaching and research excellence.

*To become a member of the exclusive group of world-class universities is not something achieved by self-declaration (Salmi, 2009: 15)*

What makes a university world class is inherently subjective (Levin, Jeong & Ou, 2006; Altbach 2003). Li (2012: 320) suggests that the concept is 'ambiguous, uncertain, and contested, varying from one context to the next'. Despite the deemed subjective and ambiguous nature, the concept of the world class university appears both well established and widely discussed in higher education discourse.

*Everyone 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 (Altbach, 2003: 5)*



Levin, Jeong and Ou (2006: 22) suggest that a world class university is most commonly conceptualised around 'widespread agreement of a world class reputation', whilst Salmi (2009: 15) believes world class status is conferred 'on the basis of international recognition'. As Levin, Jeong and Ou (2006) acknowledge, this conception only serves to raise the questions as to what constitutes world class reputation. There is a sense that global reputation and therefore world class standing come to be measured through dimensions that are 'visible' (Levin, Jeong & Ou, 2006: 22). To this end, research activity, publications, citations, and major faculty awards, in the view of Levin, Jeong and Ou (2006) become the most significant measures of a world class university. Herein a potential danger of conceptualising world class on a purely 'visible' basis emerges; in short, that the educational processes and virtues of higher education institutions are not considered.

*...it is not surprising to see a focus on research criteria in the surveys and in the efforts of institutions to promote their importance and little or no attempt to measure and assess teaching quality or educational activities. Indeed, there is a tacit assumption that if an institution is highly competitive in its admissions that the educational quality is also very high, even without measuring that quality (Levin, Jeong & Ou, 2006: 22)*

A number of commentators have sought to define what makes a world class university stand apart from the rest. Questions posited by Levin, Jeong and Ou (2006) perhaps best present the issues which these commentators seek to address and which this literature seeks to explore.

*What does it mean to be a World Class University? Is this simply a public relations claim or does it have substance? What are the criteria for World Class status, and how would we know that a university has reached that lofty height? (Levin, Jeong & Ou, 2006: 2)*

Simmons (2003) provides a broad overview of the principles that should be adhered to if a university is to be regarded as a world class institution. The first principle suggests the universities mission and vision should be aligned to local societal goals. The second focuses on quality underpinned academic rigour, particularly with regards to peer review and knowledge generation. The final principle suggests the institution should be progressive, future facing and nurture democracy, most notably through academic freedom and the fostering of free ideas.

Salmi (2009: 19) suggests that the superior results of world class universities can be attributed to 'three complementary factors at play in top universities', namely a high concentration of talent, abundant resources and favourable governance.

Salmi's world class university model encompasses more than the three overarching factors, but is broken down into a number of areas within these meta-constructs. In the view of Salmi (2009), achieving the successful alignment of these factors, through dynamic interaction, is the 'distinguishing characteristic of high-ranking universities' (Salmi, 2009: 31)



Salmi (2009) suggests concentration of talent can be considered the ‘foremost determinant of excellence’ given the underpinning need of any world-class university to have a critical mass of the best students and best faculty.

*World-class universities are able to select the best students and attract the most qualified professors and researchers (Salmi, 2009: 20)*

In addition, Salmi (2009: 21) believes the international presence of higher education institutions is central in order for them to be considered world class. In particular, Salmi (2009) references the need for diverse mix of staff and students who are not exclusively from the country where the university operates.

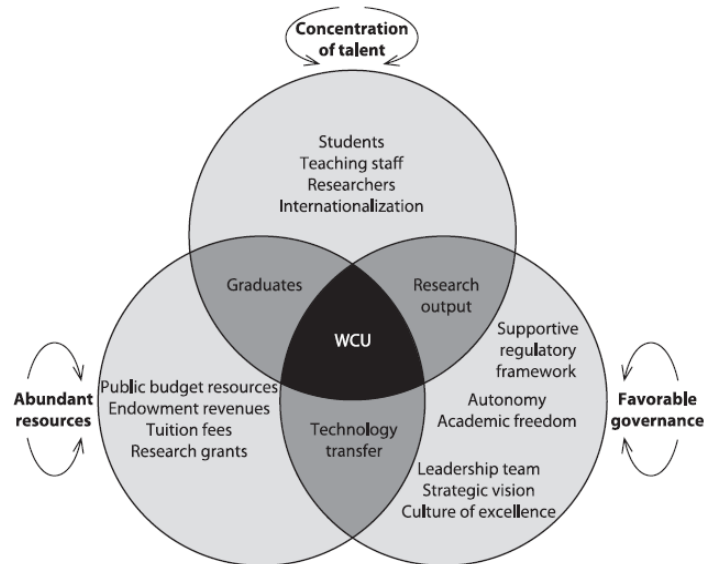


Figure 1: Characteristics of a World-Class University (Salmi, 2009)

*...the fact that world-class universities succeed in mobilizing a broadly diverse national and international academic staff is likely to maximize these institutions’ knowledge-networking capacity (Salmi, 2009: 23)*

In terms of abundant resources, Salmi (2009) suggests that world class universities, dependant on national contexts; successfully acquire funding from four main streams. The first of which is state funding typically for ‘operational expenditures and research’. Secondly, strong relationships and partnerships with public and private organisations which manifest through the funding of ‘contract research’. Third, centres on the relationship with alumni and stakeholders with regards to the receipt of endowments and gift payments. Finally, the income generated from tuition fees.

Salmi (2009: 24) believes that effectively capitalising on these four resource streams ‘creates a virtuous circle that allows institutions to attract even more top professors and researchers’.

*In academia, the adage “you get what you pay for” appears accurate regarding better-quality work being done where salaries are relatively highest (Salmi, 2009: 24)*

The third area of Salmi’s model of a world class university concerns appropriate governance. Salmi (2009) believes that government has a responsibility to foster a higher education system which allows world class universities the space to operate by allowing ‘relative independence from the state’ without being bound by bureaucracies and externally imposed standards. Salmi (2009:28) suggests that ‘competitiveness, unrestrained scientific inquiry, critical thinking, innovation and creativity’ are essential for higher education institutions to prosper and be regarded as world class.



The level of institutional autonomy which Salmi (2009) describes as a prerequisite of world class universities and indeed world class higher education systems seems to fundamentally centre upon the notion that world class universities should be free to 'manage their resources with agility and quickly respond to the demands of a rapidly changing global market' (Salmi, 2009: 28).

In addition to the levels autonomy required to enable the effective functioning of world class universities, Salmi (2009) also posits the need for further governance features to establish and maintain world class institutions. These features include 'inspiring and persistent leaders', a 'strong strategic vision', 'a philosophy of success and excellence' and a 'culture of constant reflection, organizational learning, and change' (Salmi, 2009: 28).

Altbach (2003) sought to provide a number of necessary characteristics for an institution to be ceded world class status. Fundamentally, Altbach (2003: 6) suggests 'excellence in research' underpins the meaning of world class in the context of higher education. Among the other characteristics put forward by Altbach (2003: 6), 'favourable working conditions' is one which isn't obviously replicated by other academics and commentators. Altbach (2003: 6) suggests that the working conditions within world class universities should be defined beyond remuneration but engender a culture of academic understanding whereby academic freedom and an 'atmosphere of intellectual excitement' are fostered.

In the view of Altbach (2003: 6) 'there are not many world-class universities'. However, this should not preclude universities from all mission groups aspiring to world class excellence. Indeed, it could be argued that fundamentally the notion of a world class university should be one conceptualised as an aspirational vision which underpins ambitious and progressive strategic decision making and planning in higher education institutions.

Marginson (2013: 60) appears to broadly agree with this sentiment, suggesting the term world class university should be considered an 'aspirational concept'. Marginson (2013: 61) does though posit one central component of a world class university, namely global research, which he suggests 'gives substance to the notion of the world class university'. From this Marginson (2013: 61) has developed the concept of the *Global Research University*.

The premise of Marginson's (2013: 61) focus on global research rather than the capacious bounds of the term world class university as a whole is grounded in the view that 'if there are six billion people, there are six billion definitions of 'world-class'. However, Marginson (2013) believes the concept of the Global Research University can provide a more grounded basis for understanding the platform from which world class universities operate from.

*The Global Research University has defined characteristics that can be empirically tested and verified. Because it is part of a global system of networked and parallel institutions, its common global systemic characteristics, those aspects of its profile that enable comparison and lend themselves to shared activity, are apparent across nations (Marginson, 2013: 61)*



Fundamentally, the Global Research University, described by Marginson (2013) displays significant research capacity and output, a comprehensive set of academic disciplines and sufficient resources to support globally recognised research.

Altbach (2003) raises particular caveats with regards to the notion of world class universities.

*For many countries, a world-class university is beyond the ability of the nation to support. Research universities are at the pinnacle of a differentiated academic system in a country – the rest of the system is just as important as its top (Altbach, 2003: 7)*

Altbach (2003) suggests that the pursuit of world class excellence should be approached by institutions fostering and developing world leading departments and schools which specialise in disciplines relevant at national and regional levels. Furthermore, Altbach (2003) also highlights that ‘the world-class idea is in the global sphere’. Whilst it is widely accepted that higher education institutions around the world are in many ways now very much part of a global system, Altbach (2003: 7) feels that the nuanced challenges and realities in national and regional contexts may be lost by overemphasizing the attainment of world class status; the pursuit which will inevitably lead to winners and losers, and reinforcement of institutional hierarchy and elitism and the festering of ‘unrealistic expectations that harm faculty morale and performance’.

Interestingly, Marginson (2013: 61) appears to consciously reinforce this premise, suggesting a key feature of any Global Research University includes ‘being nested locally and nationally, combined with status and recognition at global level’.

There are those that more fundamentally reject the relevance of a world class university model to a majority of higher education institutions around the globe. Douglass (2014: 1) raises particular concerns with the concept of a world class university, and instead advances a Flagship University model which is ‘grounded in national and regional service’, whilst still conscious of the international higher education landscape. Douglass (2014: 1) suggests that the notion of world class universities is an inherently Western concept ‘fixated on a narrow band of data and prestige scores’. Douglass (2014) believes the global rankings which come to define world class institutions ‘generate unachievable goals for the vast majority of aspiring universities’; in effect rendering the label of a world class university the preserve of historically elite universities that seek to reaffirm their position at the top of an unequal global higher education marketplace.

Broadly, the Flagship University conceptualised by Douglass (2014: 8) focuses on the ‘soul and culture of the institution’. Fundamentally, the flagship university should be concerned with values and ethos and ‘aspire to support regional and national socioeconomic mobility and economic development’ (Douglass, 2014: 8).



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#### **ABOUT ELEMENTA LEADERSHIP**

Elementa Leadership is a specialist strategic change and leadership consultancy with cross-sectoral international experience, focused on UK higher education. We are currently working at strategic level with universities that cover the various HE mission groups. We are committed to the future of UK higher education as central to the development of both a better society and a better economy.

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Robin holds a BA/MPLAN from UWE Bristol and an MSc in Public Policy (with Distinction) from the University of Bristol. He has been engaged in a range of research and writing roles as a part of Elementa Leadership's various higher education client projects. He has a particular interest in nation state higher education policy.