

Drawing inspiration from the recent post on the World Bank EduTech Blog by Michael Trucano on "[worst practices in ICT in education](#)" I was prompted to compile a list of common errors when attempting to build new world-class universities posted on the [Inside Higher Education World Views Blog](#) a few weeks ago. This is a more extended version of these common errors, reflecting on my observations from working with colleagues involved in advising countries keen to establish new tertiary education institutions. I am especially indebted to Richard Hopper for giving me the opportunity to learn a lot and for contributing "error number 6". I would also like to thank Roberta Malee Bassett for her insightful comments and helpful suggestions. Last but not least, I am grateful to Richard Miller, Founding President of Olin College in Massachusetts and Shamsh Kassim-Lakha, Founding President of Aga Khan University in Karachi, for sharing their wisdom and invaluable experience in the most generous manner.

Ten Common Errors When Building a New World-Class University

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“The opportunity to start from a blank page and create an entire institution from concept to reality is a rare and precious gift. It enables many possibilities that would be unthinkable at established universities... But it requires vision, passion, and courage to attempt to innovate and to deliberately create a new and improved learning culture”.

[Richard Miller](#), President of Olin College¹

In the past decade, the term “world-class university” has become a catch phrase to describe research universities at the pinnacle of the tertiary education hierarchy, as measured by the various international rankings. Around the world, governments have responded to this global reputational competition with additional funding to promote their national elite universities, as illustrated by the various “Excellence Initiatives” in countries as varied as China, Denmark, Germany, Nigeria, Russia, South Korea, Spain, or Taiwan. In some cases, the government has also encouraged its top universities to merge so as to achieve economies of scale, and reach a better position to compete globally. A few countries have even decided to establish new universities from scratch, with the explicit purpose of creating world-class institutions.

Achieving the ambitious result of launching a high quality, new university is easier said than done, however, as building a world-class institution requires more than knee-jerk reactions to the rankings or massive infusion of government money. It is a complex and lengthy process that has only recently begun to receive careful attention. The following examples outline the most common pitfalls encountered in some of the current projects that aim at establishing a new flagship institution.

- 1. Build a magnificent campus; expect magic to happen.** The physical infrastructure is obviously the most visible part of a new university. A lot of care is usually given to the design and construction of impressive, state-of-the-art facilities, and rightly so. Good academic infrastructure is certainly an important part of the education experience of students, and researchers need adequate laboratories to carry out leading-edge scientific

¹ From a December 2008 private communication.

inquiries. But, without an appropriate governance set-up, a strong leadership team, a well-thought curriculum, and highly qualified academics, the beautiful campus will remain little more than an empty shell that embodies a waste of valuable resources. [Remember the Tower of Babel!](#)

- 2. Design the curriculum after constructing the facilities.** It is often assumed that teaching and learning can easily adapt to the physical environment of the institution. This may be true for traditional lecture-based teaching, but innovative pedagogical practices often require equally innovative facilities. For example, interactive approaches, problem-based learning or pedagogical methods relying heavily on teamwork and peer learning are constrained by the physical limitations of conventional lecture halls or even classrooms. Libraries and laboratories have evolved dramatically in recent years due to changes in technology. The promoters of a new university should refrain from launching into the architectural design stage of their institution until they have established not only a clear definition of the vision and mission of the new institution but have also determined some of the specific content of teaching and research. It is particularly essential (and most prudent) to prepare the academic plan of the new institution ahead of the construction of the physical infrastructure and to tailor the latter to the requirements of the former rather than the other way around. At the very least, the academic staff should be given the opportunity to influence the design of the pedagogical and research spaces of the new institution.
- 3. Import content from somewhere else.** Why reinvent the wheel? The teams in charge of establishing new universities tend to look almost exclusively at the top-ranked institutions in industrial countries to buy or copy elements of their curriculum instead of going through the more labor-intensive process of custom designing their own programs. While this may seem expedient and practical, it is not the most effective way of building the academic culture of a new university that aims to reach high standards. The Harvards and Oxfords of this world are unique institutions that have evolved over centuries, and it is unrealistic to think that reproducing their distinctive academic model is possible or even desirable. And it is impractical to envision shopping around and bringing curricular fragments from a variety of top notch institutions across different countries / cultures, assuming that everything could easily gel together and fall in place to create an authentic learning and research culture in the new university. Curriculum development is demanding work, but it is the main mechanism that can allow a unique and innovative organizational culture to emerge.
- 4. Design with an OECD ecosystem in mind, implement elsewhere.** Replicating the three key features that make flagship universities in industrial countries successful—concentration of talent, abundant resources and favorable governance—is a fundamental requirement, but it does not encompass the full complement of operational conditions that underpin the authorizing environment of a successful world-class institution. It is difficult if not impossible to create and maintain thriving universities when the tertiary education ecosystem within which they operate is not fully supportive. Some potentially important dimensions of a favorable ecosystem include leadership at the national level (existence of a vision about the future of tertiary education, capacity to implement

reforms), the regulatory framework (legal provisions, governance structure and management processes at the national and institutional levels), the quality assurance framework, the mechanisms and pathways integrating the various types of tertiary education institutions, the financial resources and incentives, along with the digital and telecommunications infrastructure. To operate adequately, all of these require an overarching set of conditions which have to do with political and economic stability, the rule of law, the existence of basic freedoms, and a favorable location from the viewpoint of the spatial environment in which the new tertiary education institution is meant to operate (local economic, social and cultural life). The absence of even only one of these elements or the lack of alignment among these various dimensions is likely to compromise the ability of new universities to progress and endure.

5. **Delay putting in place the board and appointing the leadership team.** The resolution to establish a new university is often a political decision reflecting a visionary ambition at the highest levels that a ministry or a technical project team is then charged with putting into action. This typically leads to a centrally managed design and implementation process. Given that the establishment of a new university requires passion and drive to create a new organizational culture, it cannot be built by a disinterested committee. A project of such magnitude must be fully owned and carried out by a dynamic leadership team, working under the authority of an independent board with the capacity to offer guidance and empowerment. The first order of business of the new board has to be the identification, selection and installation of institutional leadership. Putting in place an appropriate governance framework from the outset is a key factor of success.
6. **Stack the board with political appointees.** Founders need to choose a governing board that brings together a range of essential expertise that can evolve over time. The governing board should start out small and grow very gradually to accommodate more expertise as needed. The common oversight is that people are appointed to boards on the assumption that they "represent" their institution or represent a constituency, when really they should represent an area of expertise needed in the management of the new and growing institution (legal expert, financial expert, infrastructure expert, academic experts, retired institutional leaders, etc.). Another, related misstep is to appoint governing board members who have too little time. It is better to have the board skewed toward recently retired university presidents or experts than to have too many members with too little time and dedication to the endeavor.
7. **Plan for up-front capital costs, but pay little attention to long-term financial sustainability.** The promoters of a new university usually announce with enthusiasm the huge endowment dedicated to the establishment of the new institution, but the initial capital investment is only one part of the total project. It is essential to provide adequately for the first few years of operation and to establish a thoughtful business model that allows the new institution to grow and endure in a financially sustainable manner.
8. **Be too ambitious in enrollment targets.** The leaders of new institutions sometimes think that they can rapidly enroll large numbers of students, often in the tens of

thousands. This is rarely achieved without sacrificing quality. In the 1970s, E.F. Schumacher wrote in his famous book “Small is Beautiful” that successful development projects were preferably of a small size. Small is still beautiful today, especially when it applies to setting up a new college or university. It is usually a better idea to begin with a small number of programs and student body if quality is a priority. It allows the new institution to deploy resources more prudently, to take time to develop its new academic culture, and to give precedence to quality factors over everything else. Once a strong academic culture is in place, it is easier to scale up from there.

- 9. Think that everything can be accomplished in eighteen months.** A variant of over-ambitious planning is assuming that a new institution can be launched in a matter of months and that high quality teaching and research can be accomplished within a few years of establishing a new university. In reality, rushing through the initial phase of design and implementation can often only lead to hasty decisions that can have an adverse effect on the quality and cost of the project. Furthermore, institution-building is a long-term process that requires stable leadership, continuous improvement, and patience. This is especially true when it comes to developing the robust scientific traditions needed to produce leading edge research and technological applications.

- 10. Rely exclusively on foreign academics without building up local capacity.** Hiring foreign academics is common practice to accelerate the launch of a new university in a country with limited capacity. Indeed, it makes good sense to bring experienced instructors and researchers to help put new programs in place; it can also be a very effective capacity-building strategy when an important part of the mission of the foreign academics is to train younger, less experienced academics from the host country. On the other hand, it can be a risky and counter-productive approach in the absence of systematic efforts to attract and retain qualified national academics. As with most plans that include reliance on outside actors and forces, the strategy of bringing on foreign academic staff should be one that complements the more fundamental aim of local capacity building.

In conclusion, launching a new tertiary education institution that aspires to attain the highest possible standards is a noble but extremely difficult enterprise. The road to academic excellence is full of avoidable pitfalls, as illustrated by the preceding discussion of most commonly observed errors. More importantly, the decision to build a world-class university must always be examined within the proper context to ensure full alignment with the national tertiary education strategy and avoid distortions in resource allocation patterns within the sector. With thoughtful and realistic planning, however, reaching for excellence in tertiary education, at all levels, can only be seen as a good and important thing.

Learn more about the World Bank's work in [tertiary education](#), and check out the full [Challenge of Establishing World-Class Universities](#) publication.