Conclusion

Good is the enemy of great.
Jim Collins

The highest-ranked universities are the ones that make significant contributions to the advancement of knowledge through research, teach with the most innovative curricula and pedagogical methods under the most conducive circumstances, make research an integral component of undergraduate teaching, and produce graduates who stand out because of their success in intensely competitive arenas during their education and (more important) after graduation. It is these concrete accomplishments and the international reputation associated with these sustained achievements that make these institutions world-class.

There is no universal recipe or magic formula for "making" a world-class university. National contexts and institutional models vary widely. Therefore, each country must choose, from among the various possible pathways, a strategy that plays to its strengths and resources. International experience provides a few lessons regarding the key features of such universities—high concentrations of talent, abundance of resources, and flexible governance arrangements—and successful approaches to move in that direction, from upgrading or merging existing institutions to creating new institutions altogether.

Regardless of institutional commitment or capacity to improve, building a world-class university does not happen overnight. No matter how much money is thrown at the endeavor, instant results are impossible. Achieving the goals of creating a culture of excellence and achieving high-quality outputs take many years and sustained commitment on the part of the entire constituency of the institution, internal and external.

Furthermore, the transformation of the university system cannot take place in isolation. A long-term vision for creating world-class universities—and its implementation—should be closely articulated with (a) the country's overall economic and social development strategy, (b) ongoing changes and planned reforms at the lower levels of the education system, and (c) plans for the development of other types of tertiary education institutions to build an integrated system of teaching, research, and technology-oriented institutions.

It is important to note that although world-class institutions are commonly equated with top research universities, there are also world-class tertiary education institutions that are neither research focused nor operate as universities in the strictest interpretation of the term. The U.K. Open University, for example, is widely recognized as the premier distance education institution in the world, and yet it does not make the international rankings. Conestoga College in Ontario, Canada, is ranked as the best community college in Canada, and in Germany, the Fachhochschulen of Mannheim and Bremen have outstanding reputations. In the United States, a new ranking of community colleges, based on the quality of teaching and learning, seems to imply that the top institutions, at the least, outperform some of the best four-year universities in the country (Carey 2007). Two European countries that have achieved remarkable progress as emerging knowledge economies, Finland and Ireland, do not boast any university among the top 50 in the world, but they have excellent technology-focused institutions. International rankings clearly favor research-intensive universities at the cost of excluding first-rate institutions that primarily enroll undergraduate students. Liberal arts schools such as Wellesley, Carleton, Williams, and Pomona Colleges are all considered among the very best undergraduate teaching institutions in the United States.

As countries embark on the task of establishing world-class universities, they must also consider the need to create, besides research universities, excellent alternative institutions to meet the wide range of education and training needs that the tertiary education system is expected to satisfy. The growing debate on measuring learning outcomes at the tertiary education

level, fueled by the recommendations of the 2005 Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education in the United States and OECD's 2008 initiative on Assessing Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) to study the feasibility of carrying out an international assessment of higher-education outcomes, is testimony to the recognition that excellence is not only about achieving outstanding results with outstanding students but ought perhaps to be also measured in terms of how much added value is given by institutions in addressing the specific learning needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

Finally, the building pressures and momentum behind the push for world-class universities must be examined within the proper context to avoid overdramatization of the value and importance of world-class institutions and distortions in resource allocation patterns within national tertiary education systems. Even in a global knowledge economy, where every nation, both industrial and developing, is seeking to increase its share of the economic pie, the hype surrounding world-class institutions far exceeds the need and capacity for many systems to benefit from such advanced education and research opportunities, at least in the short term. Indeed, in some countries where the existing tertiary education institutions are of higher quality than the economic opportunities available to graduates, excellent tertiary education may exacerbate existing brain-drain problems.

As with other service industries, not every nation needs comprehensive world-class universities, at least not while more fundamental tertiary education needs are not being met. World-class research institutions require huge financial commitments, a concentration of exceptional human capital, and governance policies that allow for top-notch teaching and research. Many nations would likely benefit from an initial focus on developing the best national universities possible, modeled perhaps on those developed as the land-grant institutions in the United States during the 19th century or the polytechnic universities of Germany and Canada. Such institutions would emphasize the diverse learning and training needs of the domestic student population and economy. Focusing efforts on the local community and economy, such institutions could lead to more effective and sustainable development than broader world-class aspirations. Regardless, institutions will inevitably, from here on out, be increasingly subject to comparisons and rankings, and those deemed to be the best in these rankings of research universities will continue be considered the very best in the world.