

Singapore academic summit

Building a World-class University – lessons in leadership; Luc WEBER

Thanks

A few remarks about the two dimensions of the topic: WCU and leadership to build them

Fruit of my experience as a university leader, an evaluator of a great number of universities in Europe and in the World, and as the founder of the Glion Colloquium)

About WCU

- The **Concept** of WCU:
 - is on the **top of the agenda** of HE&R policy – and, more generally, economic policy
Particularly the case in fast developing countries, as they want to catch up as rapidly as possible:
 - in increasing their economic competitiveness and
 - they are ready to invest big money (public sector, big corporations and individuals/families)
 - but, WCU are **as old as universities** (Bologna, Sorbonne, Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Johns Hopkins...)
(small (elite) community of scholars and students interested in knowledge)

- The **nature of WCU has changed over time**. Why?
 - W. v. **Humbolt** (1767-1835) model:
 - teaching based on research
 - Institutional autonomy from State, religion and later money; large academic freedom;
 - Decentralization/bottom up
 - US benefited a lot from the model
 - **then massification**
 - **Result: increasing diversification between different types of universities:** WCU, research universities, teaching universities

- **More recently: globalized world (internationalization) + disrupting scientific and technological progress:**

consequences:

 - increasing competition and knowledge economy
 - competitiveness and growth increasingly depends on knowledge (well trained, curious and autonomous HR)

3 Questions about WCU

1. Which disciplinary scope?

- a. Important to me that a **good priority is given to soft sciences** (social sciences, humanities....)! Why?

i. Society increasingly needs people

1. who understand how human systems (individual, group, firms, markets, governments, societies) are functioning
2. Have a critical, independent and innovative thinking

ii. This is **important**

1. For firms and business organization to have people who look at what they are doing from a critical point of view (it would have been useful in the financial world before the 1998 melt down)
2. for innovation
3. for the governance of any country and of the world
4. for the cohesion of society (multicultural and ethnic communities)

iii. This is a surprise for me that **in the list of research priorities (US; UK; Europe)**, we hardly see research objects like:

1. Political and economic systems
2. Regulation vs. deregulation (rewards vs. penalties)
3. Democracy
4. Governance of the World

iv. Train future educators

- v. I also observe mistrust against sciences in general and social sciences and humanities "social sciences might have only questions, whereas hard sciences have questions and answers....."

2. **Possible dangers of rankings:**

a. **Positive : Big encouragement to excellence** in research and teaching

b. Question mark: don't they encourage hard and engineering sciences?

- i. This is apparently not the case in USA and Europe (Harvard, OxBridge)

- ii. But, what about Asia which is so intense in catching up economically in “producing engineers” ?...
- c. **Negative impact on those institutions who are not part of the league** (German excellence initiative)

3. What else next to WCU?

- a. **Building WCU should not be the single priority** (should not be done at the cost of the education and training of the great majority who cannot access to WCU)
- b. The **HE&R system should be well balanced**
 - i. Different types of institutions
 - 1. Research and teaching
 - 2. Frontier and applied
 - ii. Good to have an alternative to compulsory secondary education and teaching colleges
 - iii. Moreover, some of the applied research and development should be done within firms
 - iv. The existence of a rather homogenous and well balanced system explains the very often envied position of Switzerland in competitiveness and innovation ranking (with in addition a stable political system and high capacity to integrate a good number of foreigners)
- c. **LLL**

About leadership to build a WCU

- I imagine **no one will contest that HIEs need some sort of “shared governance”** (some in Europe would speak of democratic arrangements)
- **What should be the relative importance of**
 - The State
 - The President
 - The University community (subdivisions/various groups)
- **In the past**, Uni. = community of scholars and students: this meant weak leadership (strong decentralization – bottom up)
- **Today, good leadership is different because the speed of change has dramatically changed**
 - Great need for
 - Long term vision
 - Strategic management (fixing clear priorities and implementing them)
 - Strength and courage to take tough decisions
- **Pure bottom up is not any more an efficient solution:** professors and departments see their interests (the interest of their discipline), but not sufficiently the interests of the institution and of society
- But **straight top down is no solution either:** in no other human organization there is so much talent, knowledge, capacity and will to

take initiatives at the base of the “hierarchy” **necessary condition:** leadership should pay an enormous attention that everyone take initiatives within the main objectives of the institution

Solution to aim at: good balance between bottom-up and top down.

More precise solution depends on:

- Historical, social, political, institutional context (which determines also what is possible)
- Strong charismatic, president (presidency) important
 - NTU
 - EPFL
- Relevant shared governance
- Encouragement to all members of the community to be pro-active
- Ex post evaluation (no red tape/ contradictory rules and incentives)

By way of conclusion : the best leadership cannot do miracle if there is:

- not sufficient financing
- not sufficient autonomy (bureaucracy, implementation of public rules not adapted to HEIs and often contradictory)
- no entrepreneurship spirit within the academic and administrative and technical staff