PREFACE

Over the past decade, our work has brought us to universities in Europe, Central Asia, North America, South America, and Southeast Asia. Our engagement with institutional leaders and academic communities in so many disparate contexts has enabled us to better understand the challenges colleges and universities face in these times. An idea we have encountered in a number of countries we have visited – one that has significantly shaped national policy discussions – is the desire to claim at least one "world-class university" (and sometimes many). What this meant was not always entirely clear, although it usually involved placing institutions in the "top 100" of an international ranking, preferably in the next decade. Such dreams come with hefty price tags. In some cases, pursuing the goal of a "world-class university" has resulted in a significant percentage of public higher education funds being allocated to a very few institutions. This bothered us. Was this the best way to advance higher education?

The Institutions of Excellence project grew out of a series of conversations we had with one another in which we began reflecting on the incredible work being done by institutions we had visited or whose leaders we had come to know. These were people who knew the students they served and who had thought carefully about their institution's particular purpose in the world – how they wished to serve their communities, their region, and their society. One particularly powerful articulation came from an Indonesian rector who said, "The forest is behind our university, the sea is in front of us. This defines who we are as a university."

None of these institutions were listed anywhere near the top of any major international ranking. However, we felt they offered powerful alternative conceptions of excellence that deserved attention. The purpose of this book is to lift up a small set of these institutions to demonstrate the ways in which they have conceptualized and organized their work in order to make a difference. We have tried to describe their efforts and give voice to the people who work there. We believe the ways they have pursued excellence deserve to be understood, and that policymakers would do well to consider how these

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 12 Nov 2026 at 10:46:56, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108892667.001

different approaches might inform how higher education is supported and advanced to better serve society.

The allure of creating a "world-class university" all too often leads to the clumsy and expensive pursuit of prestige. The most pervasive mechanisms for gauging prestige are rankings. Rankings do have their uses. They are tools prospective students and their families use to make sense of a bewildering array of choices in the higher education marketplace. However, as the primary metric used by policymakers and institutional leaders to measure success, we find them problematic.

Reputation, resources, and talent are all critical factors in the operational life of a university. A good reputation attracts students and faculty; wealth sustains them and offers opportunities for research, which leads to the creation and dissemination of knowledge, which in turn burnishes reputation. However, this apparently virtuous circle that rankings seek to capture overlooks efforts to improve teaching and learning, ignores efforts aimed at serving the community and broader society, and sheds no light on how institutions have defined their unique role in society, a matter of paramount importance to institutions and their leaders. It is blind to an elemental truth expressed by the cases presented in this book – that a primary means of drawing talent to an institution, and pursuing excellence, is having a clear and compelling sense of purpose regarding the work they do in the world.

Rankings favor older, richer research universities in developed countries. In the end, they are a rigged game in which universities from less-well-resourced countries find it hard to compete. Ivey, Oliver, and Henry (2014), when writing about the experiences of the University of Technology (Utech) in Jamaica, powerfully argue that rather than judging a university solely on the peer-based metrics of publications and citations, its research impact should also factor in "fidelity to mission" – the degree to which its research is serving the people of the nation and wider society. We agree.

Governments pursue world-class university strategies for a number of reasons. First, higher education, in general, is understood to be a critical factor in advancing the economic competitiveness of a country in the global knowledge economy. There is a concomitant belief that higher education systems benefit from the presence of excellent universities that conduct high-quality original research. These institutions can serve as demonstration sites for good practice, creating a spillover effect that allows other institutions to learn from them and emulate the initiatives and practices that the better-resourced institutions have developed. (This was the expressed intent in the founding of one of the institutions this study discusses.) The presence of such

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 12 Nov 2026 at 10:46:56, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108892667.001

institutions enables countries to attract, develop, and keep a pool of academic talent that trains future academics that serve the entire system. Well-resourced research universities draw some of a nation's best and brightest young minds and ensure their intellectual capital stays in the country.

However, the concept of a world-class university has garnered its share of detractors. World-class university schemes inevitably involve the concentration of resources. The State gives a far greater proportion of public monies to certain institutions in the pursuit of "world-class" status, which drains resources from other institutions – ones that serve the majority of students. Also, the world-class university model is the result of a highly instrumental view of the university – university-as-producer. It tends to favor sciences and technology – the patentable and the profitable – over the humanities, the philosophical, and the cultural. Their highly selective admissions have caused some to argue they are regressive institutions, disproportionally benefiting students who come from more affluent households.

World-class university schemes and rankings share one other critical flaw: They are blind to the most important factors that influence institutional success – organizational culture and institutional purpose. The shared beliefs and values significantly influence an organization's effectiveness, including how students are taught and nurtured and what research is done, behaviors that shape excellence in all areas of university life. How an institution describes its unique work in the world – its mission – can be a key factor in fostering a shared sense of purpose among those who work there, a quality that can raise a deep sense of belonging. A central feature of all the institutions this study discusses is a clear understanding of how they serve society, even if that vision is a contested one. They understand how they are trying to make a difference in the world; and in our view, institutional efforts that lead to positive change in the lives of others are a truer marker of impact and relevance than peer-reviewed journal articles, numbers of grant dollars, or patents.

The purpose of this book is to document how different higher education institutions in eight national and economic environments define and pursue excellence, where excellence is significantly defined by their contexts and the people they serve. The importance we place on context, organizational culture, and mission means that we are not proposing a single universal conception or assessment rubric to measure excellence or quality in higher education. Rather, we are looking for the disparate ways institutions define and enact their purposes, how they align institutional behavior with their stated values and institutional goals, the practices they use to uphold their key

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 12 Nov 2026 at 10:46:56, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108892667.001

principles, and the ways in which they seek to foster these values within these academic communities.

These cases also shed light on the tensions that emerge as these institutions seek to realize their missions. For some the challenge involves negotiating their place within the larger environment. For others it involves reconciling disparate internal views about their purposes and struggling to determine what markers of success to follow – those that emulate international practices or those that serve local needs. Many of these institutions are feeling the tug of market pressures and fear these may become a rip tide, dragging them from their moorings of mission and values.

Despite these challenges, ultimately, we believe the stories of these institutions should be told because of the compelling work they do in the world. We believe they offer important alternative conceptions of excellence – ones that run at cross grain with ranking schemes and world-class university models. The variety of approaches and the ways these eight institutions have adapted to serve their unique purposes offer promising pathways that other institutions may wish to emulate. We also believe their stories ought to cause policymakers to reconsider what kinds of "excellence" they choose to support and fund. They may also encourage students and parents to choose places of learning whose central aim is the good they try to do in the world rather than the pursuit of prestige.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 12 Nov 2026 at 10:46:56, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108892667.001