

## **Going beyond Narratives; an Exploration of the ABC of Becoming a World Class University**

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**Abstract:** *The study evaluated the concept of world class status with specific reference to higher education institutions delivering services through the ODL mode of education. There has been varied discourse with limited consensus on what defines a world class ODL university, in terms of the characteristics, impact and resources of the particular institution. The study therefore sought to establish criteria that would be useful for defining what a world class ODL university would be. The study employed a qualitative research methodology while utilising the survey research design. Secondary data were gathered through analysing journal publications while primary data were gathered through interviews. Primary data were generated through in-depth interviews. The respondents were selected using the purposive sampling technique. The study sample was composed of fifteen (15) researchers, inclusive of senior managers and academics at respective universities worldwide who attended the 2015 International Research Conference hosted by the Zimbabwe Open University. The study identified the following factors as the imperatives to a world class status in ODL education; the quality of teaching, quality and impact of research output, specialisation, promotion of academic freedom and democracy, citations, good corporate governance, latest ICT resources, international outlook, self sustenance and independence, collaborations and relationships, ground breaking innovations and income from intellectual property, research output and global impact. The study revealed that world class universities concentrated on achieving excellence in areas of specialisation. These universities eventually achieve global significance hence the study concludes that they should be regarded more as global universities and not world class universities.*

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### **I. Introduction**

Contemporary wisdom informs the academic community that a world class university is one that projects certain characteristics and competencies comparable to top universities in the world. A world class university is known throughout the world for its outstanding competence in one area or the other. For instance, when one hears the name Harvard University one immediately thinks of research. In the same vein, when the name University of South Africa (UNISA) is mentioned academics quickly think of its competence in ODL tutoring. UNISA is a pioneer in the field of e-learning and has innovatively perfected its e-learning technologies. Because of its world class competence in e-learning technologies it has developed its tutoring capability into fully-fledged world class e-tutoring and aims to migrate to complete paperless e-learning delivery in future. Indira Gandhi National Open University has managed to increase its enrolment figures more than half a million students through the utilisation of ICT, the impact of the university in India and in the Asian Region has been significant.

Universities are not founded as world class institutions of higher learning, they take deliberate and focused decisions to grow and develop themselves into world class status. The process of growth and development is an arduous and complex one. A university identifies its core business areas and compares this with its complement of core competencies. It is from an alignment of the core competences to the core business areas that informs the university on which single core business area to grow and develop in order for it to become, first, local leader, and with time it becomes a regional leader, and, finally, it becomes a world class university in its chosen core area of competence.

A pointer by Dirks (2015) is that the goal of government in establishing state universities was to broaden access to higher education, as well as to direct the educational and research activity of these universities towards more practical and developmental pursuits. The role of state universities has turned out to be the establishment of broad research agendas, exposure of new research activities to the general public, notwithstanding the central function of teaching and learning and community service. These are the universities that grow into world class institutions of higher learning, like Stanford University.

#### **1.1 Statement of the problem**

Higher education has been characterised by internationalisation since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century due to technological advances and globalisation. Opportunities for growth have resulted from internationalisation. There has, however, been limited conversation in the ODL sector, particularly in Zimbabwe on the major characteristics and strategies by which universities transform into world class institutions.

### 1.2 Purpose of the study

The study endeavours to explore the discourse on what defines a world class university and the strategies adopted by universities in attaining world class status. An understanding of what defines or characterises a world class university is imperative given the huge investment in competencies and resources by such universities.

### 1.3 Research objectives

The study focused on the following objective;

- To explore the attributes of a world class university
- To determine whether local ODL universities have the capacity to develop to World Class Universities.

### 1.4 Research questions

The major research question;

- What are the attributes of a world class university?
- Is it feasible for local universities to strive to be world class universities?

## II. Review of Related Literature

The international academic industry has been dominated by elite rated universities, these are the institutions known as world class institutions. The majority of the top universities are conventional institutions. Open and distance learning institutions have not been featuring in the top ranks.

The criteria for ranking higher education institutions is varied and dependant on the institution conducting the ranking. The interests of the ranking institution, hence plays an important part on the criteria. This has resulted in the lack of a universally agreeable methodology for conducting university ranking.

Times Higher Education and Quacquarelli Symonds are two institutions which have been conducting world ranking of universities, jointly from 2004 to 2009 and separately from 2010. They have been producing and publishing their outputs under the banner of Times Higher Education World University Rankings. According to the Times ranking since 2004, the most important criteria for ranking higher education institutions include:

- citations – research influence
- the teaching environment
- research volume, income and reputation
- international mix of staff and students
- industry income – innovation

The March 2016 rankings according to industry income were as follows;

Rank	Institution	Country	Industry income per academic (PPP \$US)
1	LMU Munich	Germany	392,800
2	Duke University	US	287,100
3	Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST)	South Korea	254,700
4	Johns Hopkins University	US	249,900
5	Anadolu University	Turkey	242,500
5	Wageningen University and Research Center	Netherlands	242,500
7	China University of Petroleum (Beijing)	China	227,600
8	Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio)	Brazil	204,600
9	Istanbul University	Turkey	202,000
10	University of Freiburg	Germany	201,700
11	Peking University	China	198,800
12	National Cheng Kung University	Taiwan	182,100
13	Pohang University of Science and Technology	South Korea	172,800
14	KU Leuven	Belgium	163,700
15	Stellenbosch University	South Africa	156,600
16	Tianjin University	China	152,800
17	Tsinghua University	China	150,200
18	Delft University of Technology	Netherlands	148,700
19	Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences	Sweden	144,200
20	University of Basel	Switzerland	139,000

The academic Ranking of World Universities (2015) divides world university rankings into Top 500 and Top 200 universities per subject area. For instance:

#### Top 5 world universities

1. Harvard University
2. Stanford University

3. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)
4. UC Berkeley
5. U. Cambridge

In these rankings the universities are ranked as whole institutions and become world class universities at the very top. The second method of ranking universities is to rank them according to subject areas, which they call their core business areas. A university could specialise in Science subjects only. This is illustrated below.

### **Top 200 Universities (per subject area)**

#### **Social Sciences**

1. Harvard University
2. U Chicago
3. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)
4. Columbia U
5. UC Berkeley

#### **English**

1. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)
2. Stanford University
3. UC Berkeley
4. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC)
5. UT Austin

#### **Medicine**

1. Harvard University
2. University of California, San Francisco (UCSF)
3. University Washington
4. Johns Hopkins University (JHU)
5. Stanford University

#### **Sciences**

1. UC Berkeley
2. Harvard University
3. Princeton University
4. Stamford University
5. Caltech

It is probably true, according to the rankings shown above; that the top universities are in the United States of America, but there would be no reason for other universities outside the US not to aspire to be world class universities, as well.

A university could choose an area of institutional competence and invest resources in that area to grow and develop it to world class status. When a university has attained world class status in one area the other areas would not be too far behind the candle-bearer in the relevant subject or area. What is interesting in the above rankings is that it seems as if there is no university that is the best in all its core business areas.

The QS World University Rankings (2013-2014) provide a generally agreeable criterion for ranking Universities. The overall rankings and classification of Universities is based on a composite of criteria which is then averaged to calculate the average ranking. The criteria used for ranking include:

- academic reputation
- employer reputation
- faculty student
- citations per faculty
- international faculty
- international students

The QS ranking system evaluates universities on each of the above strategic areas and allots points. The overall total would then determine the ranking of the university and its world class status as indicated in the table below.

#### ***World University ranking (2014)***

2012 rank	2013 rank	Institution	Country	Classification				Academic reputation		Employer reputation		Faculty student		Citations per Faculty		International Faculty		International students		Overall score
				Size	focus	Res	Age	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	
1	1	Massachusetts institute of technology	US	M	CO	VH	5	100	6	100	5	100	14	99.7	13	97.6	49	96.3	48	100
2	3	Harvard University	US	L	FC	VH	5	100	1	100	3	99.3	33	100	4	94.1	74	85.3	105	99.2
3	2	University of Cambridge	GB	L	FC	VH	5	100	2	100	2	99.6	30	95.8	37	95.5	65	96.0	51	99
4	4	University College London	GB	L	FC	VH	5	99.9	16	98.7	22	98.9	37	95.6	38	96.5	54	100	10	98.9
5	6	Imperial College London	GB	L	FC	VH	5	99.9	14	100	9	99.8	11	92.5	49	99.9	34	99.9	11	98.8
6	5	University of Oxford	GB	L	FC	VH	5	100	3	100	1	100	62	93.1	45	97.7	47	96.7	42	98.7
7	15	Stanford University	GB	L	FC	VH	5	100	5	100	7	94.4	4	100	5	76.5	170	76	139	96.8
8	7	University of Yale	US	L	FC	VH	5	100	10	100	14	100	6	88.8	58	94.4	73	72.7	156	96.5
9	8	University of Chicago	US	M	FC	VH	5	99.9	15	94.3	41	96.2	51	97.8	28	78.8	161	74.9	147	96.2
10	10	Carlifonia institute of Technology	US	L	FC	VH	5	99.6	25	69.2	146	100	5	100	2	92.2	90	87.7	95	96.1
10	9	Princeton University	US	M	CO	VH	5	100	11	95.1	38	96.3	50	98.8	23	76.3	169	68.8	179	96.1

QS World University Rankings (2013/14)

Legend			
Size	Focus	Research intensity	Age
XL - Extra large	FC-Fully comprehensive	VH- Very high	5 – Historic ( $\geq 100$ )
L – Large	CO - Comprehensive	HI – High	4 – Mature ( $\leq 100$ )
M - Medium	FO - Focused	MD- Medium	3 – Established ( $\leq 50$ )
S - Small	SP - Specialist	LO – Low	2 – Young ( $\leq 25$ )
			1 – New ( $\leq 10$ )

### Perceptions of a world class university

Siwinska (2013) reports that the Fifth International Conference on World-Class Universities, WCU-5, took place from 3-6 November, 2014, under the general theme of “Global Outreach of World-Class Universities: How it is affecting higher education”. It was the general view of Conference participants that it was imperative for every country to have a world class university. The major problem issue during deliberations was that, no one knew what a world class university was and no one had figured out how each country would get one, because the universities did not agree on definitive criteria. This problem arose due to the many yardsticks players used in trying to define a world class university, but conference talked of world-class perceived excellence and real excellence.

According to Siwinska (2013) the world-class landscape drastically changed since the turn of the millennium. Many countries harboured specific ambitions to have world class universities of their own. This has led to an acceleration of excellence and quality assurance initiatives in the world. Siwinska (2013) noted that 30 countries were making deliberate efforts to move towards creating world class universities, especially in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, some regions in Africa and Latin America.

The proliferation of world class initiatives has been pushed by developments in the global economy which include world ranking systems, growing importance of research output and the increased appreciation of the contribution of top class universities to growth and development initiatives to economic systems. Dirks (2015), in a treatise on world class universities, attributes the steady stream of income to public universities as a consequence of their influence in the world of economic development, and their freedom from political interference.

Another persuasive reason is that world class universities have become reference-points and magnets for a variety of critical domains in university education at both national and international level. These world class universities enjoy a concentration of research funding, institutional re-positioning and the promotion of academic collaboration and the search for talent and expertise. The “new geo-politics” of higher education at a

global level, to a greater extent is promoted by the quest for world class universities characterised by excellence. According to Dirks (2015), the proliferation of excellence - driven initiatives in America's great public universities played a crucial role in fostering, not just the research capabilities of the contemporary university, but also economic growth, innovation, civic engagement, socio-economic mobility, a vibrant democracy that is also functional, and an engaged and enlightened civil society that gets engaged in both local and national issues.

The significance of the state universities is not just that they should provide access, but more specifically and importantly, they should provide access to affordable excellence on a very large scale. State universities could work on the principle that the greater the access, and the more disadvantaged and diverse the population served at affordable excellence, the better the rewards. The rewards should accrue not just to the individual students whose civic and intellectual lives are enhanced, but for the community as a whole that benefits from a well educated and rounded citizenry. State universities maintain a strong commitment to public service in the form of inclusiveness of students from across the socio-economic spectrum, especially at international level.

The contemporary world class university concerns itself with complex global challenges, ranging from climate change, growing global inequality, forced migration, cultural misunderstanding and strife and cyber-security and health; the list of challenges transcends the challenges that beset non-world class universities. Additionally, Dirks (2015) says that world class universities should gear themselves to building new kinds of global partnerships that have the means and motivation to shape the global agenda. World class universities should grapple with issues related to global governance, global ethics, global citizenship and global relationships more than they tackle national challenges. The writer's argument, supported by Dirks (2015), is that world class universities could be referred to as global universities. Their responsibilities should, therefore, include working together to build a global curricula and global platforms for research and teaching; the provision of models and ideas that predicate new ways of engaging, and re-imagining the concept of globalisation itself.

It is the writer's view that a world class university should have a peculiar thinking and worldview and strategies in mapping out a course of action for itself. A world class university can no longer afford to think and plan small. Ideas and processes emanating from world class universities should have a global impact.

Views contrary to the abrupt and immediate creation of world class universities include the argument that countries need to systematically put in place a more comprehensive tertiary education system before they could talk of world class education. The argument is that the education system should include world class technical colleges, community colleges and distance education institutions.

### **III. Research Methodology**

The study employed the qualitative research approach utilising the survey research design. Data were gathered through a mixture of strategies, secondary data were gathered through desk research analysing journal publications. Primary data were gathered through interviews with researchers attending the International Research Conference. A sample of 15 respondents, who were also top international university administrators, was selected using the purposive sampling technique. Presentation of data was done through a narrative. The study was carried out while maintaining the highest level of ethical standards and confidentiality

### **IV. Findings**

The researchers interviewed respondents, enquiring on their perceptions on what constitutes a world class university, its attributes, and the strategies employed by universities generally considered as world class institutions. The responses generally focused on the outputs of the universities, general governance and administrative strategies of the universities.

#### **4.1 Criteria used to define a world class University**

##### **4.1.1 Global impact**

It was the general view of respondents that world class universities are widely acclaimed universities with a global relevance and visibility. One such university which was given as an example is Harvard University. The University's global impact is notable through its alumni, which is composed of renowned business people and administrators of global institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The study, therefore, suggests that an ODL university aspiring for world class status should monitor the extent and trends of its global impact through a global impact factor analysis. This involves the development of an analytic tool with several dimensions which have an implication or relevance to the global relevance and participation of the university

#### **4.1.2 Research output**

The study revealed that world class universities, regardless of mode of delivery, are characterised by high quality research output. Respondents indicated that commitment to research was reflected in the university's budget and structure. The study shows that renowned universities have departments which are wholly dedicated to research and scholarship. As such, the respondents indicated that internationally successful universities published and maintained high standard peer reviewed journals. An emerging point of significance from the research, therefore, is that universities should monitor and control their research output in terms of quality and quantity.

#### **4.1.3 Ground breaking innovations and intellectual property**

An important point to note on research output of world class universities is the relevance of that research in the real world. The study revealed that institutions categorised as world class universities produced research output that is of socio economic value, transforms the quality of life and improves business processes. Respondents emphasised that research output in academic institutions should lead to intellectual property. A favourite example posed was the work of Elton Mayo in his Hawthorne experiments which resulted in improved work processes and an increase in productivity.

The study revealed that 21<sup>st</sup> century universities were rated according to varied criteria but the production of intellectual property was regarded as an important indicator of genuine and quality academic research. Respondents from mainly African universities noted that their universities were on a revolution in terms of production of intellectual property and there was a notable increase in funding for research in African Universities.

#### **4.1.4 Citations**

Researchers and academics in the study observed that the global impact of universities in this technological world was influenced by the number of citations; the more citations the university's research output has, the greater the impact of the university on the global stage. The study revealed that universities were actively influencing the volume of research through establishing journals and sponsoring research projects by academics.

#### **4.1.5 Collaborations and relationships**

The study revealed that world class universities were characterised by collaborations and relationships with other organisations. The respondents indicated that world class universities partnered their respective governments, the military, hospitals, local authorities and private sector institutions in fostering development projects. These collaborations help in creating a good brand image of the university and the academic fraternity in general as an integral component nationally and internationally.

#### **4.1.6 Self sustenance and independence**

It was a generally agreed perception of respondents that for a university to attain world class status, there was need for self sustenance and therefore independence from the influence of constraining forces such as the need for political affiliation and allegiance. The implication, therefore, was that universities should have sustainable revenue streams and should pursue viable commercial ventures. The study revealed that world class universities survive on their own generated funds from tuition fees, consultancy fees, research and other ventures.

#### **4.1.7 Latest ICT resources**

Respondents identified information communication technology as an essential core competence in the delivery of world class higher education services in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Investment in ICT was therefore viewed as a major determinant of service quality and the cultivation of sustainable relations with stakeholders of universities. The study revealed that world class resources were advanced in the use of ICT resources in teaching and learning. Lectures and tutorial sessions in leading universities were being delivered online and in real time through YouTube and other online delivery channels to the convenience of the students.

#### **4.1.8 Good corporate governance**

The study revealed that the extent to which universities uphold good corporate governance determined the success and credibility of such institutions internationally. This includes adherence to regulatory requirements and other obligations the academic institutions are expected to observe and comply with. Respondents indicated that most leading universities in Africa and internationally were looking towards ISO certification in an endeavour to maximise compliance with quality standards.

#### **4.1.9 Promotion of Academic freedom and democracy**

The ability of lecturers and students to engage in academic discourse without the fear of retribution and threats was identified as a fundamental condition in the creation of an enabling environment in a university. The respondents indicated that universities in countries where there were no political, religious and social boundaries to academic debate progressed more effectively into world class institutions. The study revealed that the most important strategy used in ensuring academic freedom for lecturers is tenureship. There was consensus that lecturers who were tenured were protected from unfair dismissal and harassment for divergent political views.

#### **4.1.10 Specialisation**

Respondents were of the view that universities should pursue specialised areas of expertise and strive to be the best in their respective areas of specialisation. The majority of the respondents revealed that from their experience in university administration, major government and private sector organisations were prepared to partner universities that have proven expertise in specific areas of specialisation. The level of specialisation and expertise in universities, according to respondents, is measured by the number of top professors at a respective university in the notable area of specialisation.

#### **4.1.11 Innovation - Industry income**

Respondents were of the view that world class universities were characterised by innovation and production of useful concepts, designs and products which are sold to industry at premium prices. According to Robert Tijssen, Chair of Science and Innovation studies at Leiden University in the Netherlands, alongside societal engagement, “university-industry connectivity is now the third mission of a university, next to teaching and training and research” (Times, 2016). The Higher Education Funding Council for England, in 2015 revealed that partnerships between universities and industry in England was worth £3.9 billion and had grown by £300 million in 12 months. Universities were, therefore, competing and ranked on the basis of industry income.

### **4.2 Factors affecting 3<sup>rd</sup> world country universities to attain World Class Status**

#### **4.2.1 Low government support for research due to budgetary constraints**

The respondents indicated that attaining a world class status for 3<sup>rd</sup> world country universities was hindered by lack of funds. Most of the universities are grant aided – government institutions and depend on funds from the government, the countries face economic challenges, are donor dependant therefore cannot adequately guarantee funding for research.

#### **4.2.2 Inability to attract top professors due to poor working conditions**

Local universities and other universities in 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries face challenges in attracting top professors and also retaining their own academics as they progress with their careers due to the relatively poor working conditions. The respondents cited the case of Zimbabwean universities which were derailed by losing lecturers during the period of economic instability.

#### **4.2.3 Poor university-industry collaboration**

Universities in Zimbabwe and other third world countries have not been able to engage in meaningful collaboration with partners in industry because of the harsh economic environment which has affected industry capacity utilisation.

#### **4.2.4 Policy inconsistencies and political interference**

The study revealed that policy inconsistencies and political interference in the affairs of universities significantly affected their capacity to operate effectively. The respondents indicated that universities contributed significantly to government programmes but were also expected not to deviate from the philosophies of central governments which limited critical thinking and innovation.

## **V. Conclusion**

The study concludes that the ‘world class status’ of a university refers to a cluster of competencies and strategic initiatives undertaken by the respective institutions. Institutions should build internal environmental conditions which create an enabling environment for academic excellence. This includes conditions of academic freedom and good corporate governance. Institutions also need to decide on becoming world class and deploy resources towards the vision. The factors determining the status of ODL universities and conventional universities’ rating are universal. The Strategies of universities that are aspiring to be world class institutions, should therefore, be guided by the factors identified in this study.

## **VI. Recommendations**

World class status for universities in 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries would transform the economies and societies of the countries hence the importance of concrete efforts to achieve this feat. This study recommends the following;

- Universities should develop alternative income generating activities to enable self sustenance
- A paradigm shift is essential from universities to focus on collaborating with small scale enterprises as they are contributing the greater part of GDP
- Universities should publish journals, which increase income through publication charges and also improve research and citations
- Universities should in processes to foster good corporate governance such as attaining ISO certification so as to attract international partners

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