

ACCELERATED UNIVERSITIES: IDEAS AND MONEY COMBINE TO BUILD ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE (Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands, February 2018)

Foreword

A great university is in a constant state of renewal. Every year a new crop of entering students arrives on campus, seemingly even more talented and accomplished than their predecessors. Every year another class of students celebrates their graduation, bursting with energy and eager to bring their hard-won knowledge to their new places of work. The university's faculty is also in a permanent state of flux, making new discoveries, advancing the frontiers of knowledge in their specialties, and sometimes inventing entirely new fields of research.

For societies in the knowledge era, research universities are perhaps the ultimate renewable resource. A great research university, though often stereotyped as a calm, quiet place of study and reflection, and indeed usually quite placid on the surface, is in reality more like a great, churning machine, continually—in that now rather hackneyed phrase—inventing the future. These institutions are valuable not only to those who inhabit them—the students, faculty, and administrators, and of course the alumni—but also to governments (national, state, and local), to employers, to sponsors of research in industry, and to philanthropists. They are recognized as the source of the two most valuable assets in the knowledge economy: new ideas, and highly educated people. They also help to attract other key economic resources to their environs, including innovating firms as well as entrepreneurs, financiers, and others seeking to exploit the continual stream of new ideas and business opportunities flowing from the campus. Small wonder that successful research universities have become signifiers of local and national status and international prestige.

Of course, universities are often also chastised for being elitist, out of touch, and overly privileged. But even populist-tinged governments pay attention to the university rankings, and not a few of them have recently launched initiatives to raise their own universities higher in the league tables. Everyone wants to have a world-class institution of higher education—even politicians with a fondness for acting, or at least sounding, like barbarians at the university gates.

Much has been written about the world's leading universities, how they operate, and what makes them successful. Independent governance, capable leadership, a culture and tradition of excellence, strong government support for research, a vigorously competitive environment for the best students, faculty, and other resources. All of these aspects, and more, have been identified in the literature as key success factors. But much less has been written about the origins of these universities. How do such valuable institutions get started? How can they most quickly take their place among the world's best? What is the surest route to the top? What are the pitfalls to avoid?

This excellent volume provides some authoritative answers to these questions. Its roots lie in a conference at MIT in early 2016 that brought together the presidents of nine of the world's leading young universities and an international group of prominent higher education scholars. The conference provided a valuable opportunity for the university leaders to share their experiences and to learn from each other. But, more than that, the goal of the conference organizers was to fill a gap in our understanding of the early stages of development of successful higher education institutions. This is an important gap to fill. Much of what

we think we know about the origins of today's most prominent universities may by now be founding myths rather than actual events. Indeed, for the older members of this club, even the founding myths have been lost in the mists of time. And in any case, the challenges of launching a new university today are surely utterly different from what they were hundreds of years ago.

The chapters of this book contain a wealth of practical insights and experiences that are directly relevant to today's circumstances. It is fair to say that the case studies of university startups in this volume comprise a uniquely comprehensive compendium. Some of the lessons are unsurprising. For example: strong and sustained financial backing is vital from the outset. Even so, there is never enough money. Visionary leadership is essential; talented people are all. But other lessons are less familiar. Perhaps most interesting is the implication that it needn't take a century or more to build a world-class university. It cannot happen overnight, of course, but the evidence presented in this book suggests that a great deal can be accomplished in a relatively short period of time. This is interesting for many reasons. Perhaps most important, as the middle class in the world's developing and middle-income economies continues its rapid expansion, the demand for high-quality educational opportunities at outstanding universities will grow apace. Existing universities cannot possibly meet this demand. New universities will therefore be established, in some cases with funding provided by wealthy entrepreneurs, in others by governments. The pressures to build some of these into world-class educational and research institutions will be great. For anyone who wants to know how to achieve this as quickly as possible, and with the greatest likelihood of success, you will not do better than to read this book.

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