

SUMMARY

Six Lessons to Learn from Asia's World-Class Universities



Top universities use a multidisciplinary approach and collaborate with other organizations to bring about scientific and technological innovations. Photo credit: ADB

A combination of factors, including having savvy leaders, strategic planning, and key collaborations, has helped four Asian universities rise up the league table.

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Overview

Many countries aspire to have a world-class university.

A 2009 World Bank study notes the “growing desire” to land at the top of the league tables not just on the part of universities but also the countries hosting these institutions. “Global comparison indicators have gained significance in local development of universities. These world-class universities are now more than just cultural and educational institutions—they are points of pride and comparison among nations that view their own status in relation to other nations,” the study says.

But what does it mean to be a world-class university? Global rankings look at both objective and subjective criteria, so there has been debate on what “world-class” actually means.

In Asia and the Pacific, Tsinghua University in the People’s Republic of China; the University of Science and Technology in Hong Kong, China; the State University of New York in Incheon in the Republic of Korea; and the Singapore Management University have all distinguished themselves in numerous university global rankings. The path to the top did not come easy, but these universities succeeded, thanks to a combination of factors, including having savvy leaders, strategic planning, and key collaborations.

This is a summary of the panel discussion on what it means to develop a world-class university at the Asian Development Bank’s [7th International Skills Forum](#) in Manila in December 2017.

Lessons

Here are some lessons shared by these universities on what it takes to become world-class.

Adopt a multidisciplinary approach.

Pushing for a multidisciplinary approach is now a trend in many universities today as a way to solve problems. At Singapore Management University, faculty members are required to collaborate with others outside of their fields in order to offer fresh solutions to problems that may be facing industries. Also, students are encouraged to have a double degree or second major to broaden their horizons. In fact, 70% of students have a double degree or a second major. The other three schools also advocate for multidisciplinary collaboration among their faculty.

Partner and collaborate.

Set up in 2001, Tsinghua University’s branch campus, the Graduate School, Tsinghua University, Shenzhen, was jointly founded by Tsinghua University and the Shenzhen Municipal Government. It was created to cultivate top-level professionals and to carry out scientific and technological innovations and plays an important role in Tsinghua’s commitment to achieve international prominence. To date, the graduate school has 3,027 students, including 344 PhD candidates.

Singapore Management University is also a believer in collaboration. It set up the school’s International Trading Institute, with help from the Singapore government and leading industry players, allowing the school to have a specialist focus on international trading. The university was able to secure government and industry support as the institute prepares students for commodity and international trading, which is a key pillar of the Singapore economy.

Link with industry.

Universities have to connect with industry in order to prepare a curriculum that is responsive to the needs of employers and to make sure graduates are hireable. Singapore Management University, for instance, works with oil giants Shell and BP, as well as commodity trading firm Trafigura, and others, to

ensure students get prized internships at the companies and to involve them in designing and reviewing the schools' curriculum. It has forged a host of industry partnerships to open internship and employment opportunities for students.

Find leaders with good connections.

One of the key success factors for the State University of New York in Incheon is the fact that its founder and honorary president Myung Oh has been involved not just in academia but also in government and industry. This gave him a unique perspective when it comes to setting the vision and planning for the university, which has to continuously work with government and industry to develop a curriculum that produces work-ready graduates.

Hire the best.

For the University of Science and Technology in Hong Kong, China, a key success factor in attaining world-class status is hiring the best people. This means hiring the best researchers and teachers. Universities may also recruit from the diaspora.

Leverage on technology.

The State University of New York in Incheon has leveraged on technology to drive learning, as the Korean government has done to grow its economy over the years. The university offers degrees on applied mathematics and statistics, computer science, mechanical engineering, and technological systems management. On the more practical side, the availability of digital tools has allowed faculty members to dispense entirely with paper syllabus and gave students and teachers the leeway to forgo visits to the brick and mortar library as learning materials are now all online.

Recommendations

Given the standards required, can developing countries aim for world-class status?

Annie Koh, vice-president at Singapore Management University, says it is possible for universities in developing countries to aspire for world-class status. "I think it is important that your university be a catalyst for change, a relevant and impactful change. In countries like Nepal and Bhutan, learn your own rhythm, your relevance to your community, to your own country."

She adds, "Governance is important. You must be accountable. You have to have transparency in your numbers. And you have to have a vision where you want to lead your team and be impactful in your own country. You are a world of your own and you can be world-class in your world."

Gerard Postiglione, chair professor of higher education at the University of Science and Technology in Hong Kong, China, cautions countries about unilaterally embracing league tables' definition of "world-class," noting that any developing country can have a world-class university based on standards that suit its country and context.

James Larson, vice-president at State University of New York in Incheon, urges universities in developing countries to take advantage of digital technology as a means to adopt world-class standards. "The key will be leveraging networks and digital," he says.

Resources

J. Sarvi and H. Pillay. 2015. *Innovations in Knowledge and Learning for Competitive Higher Education in Asia and the Pacific*. Mandaluyong: Asian Development Bank.

J. Salmi. 2009. *The Challenge of Establishing World-Class Universities. Directions in Development; Human Development*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

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