

# Preface

This anthology is an outgrowth of my interest in higher education and my discovery, so to speak, of Joseph Ben-David (1920–1986), i.e. after I had assumed, in the late 1980s, new duties as a planning official at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zürich (ETHZ). Prior to my new administrative position I had been unaware of Ben-David. For one and one-half decades I had worked outside the framework of the university, focusing on multi-purpose water resources planning, on hydro-electric and agricultural development, primarily in developing countries around the globe, or on waste-disposal systems in the chemical industry. Before that time, although being associated with universities as a student and faculty member, my focus was not on the institution of higher education.

In my new function at ETHZ, however, higher education was now the focus, and I was immediately confronted with a clash of cultures. My experience with universities in the late 1950s until the mid 1970s in Germany, Switzerland and the US, and my experience outside the premises of the university during the late 1970s and the 1980s, appeared to indicate that higher education cultures were nationally oriented. This was much more the case than it has for the industries surrounding the higher education landscape in the wake of globalization. The question posed itself as to what extent higher education systems that differed that markedly in their structure were in a position to be equally effective.

Quality stands at the core of research universities, and quality related issues became a central part of the daily work of many university administrators. Quality management, first developed in the industrial context in the US and Japan (Juran 1995), was taken up in the sphere of public administration (Osborne and Gaebler 1992) and universities under an expanded focus and name: Total Quality Management (TQM). TQM spawned a great number of workshops and publications, and the hope was that a collective focus on quality improvement would lift institutions to new heights of excellence. However, TQM did nothing to iron out differences in effectiveness which separated national higher education systems, and the hype subsided a few years after it had entered the stage of the higher education scene.

The focus on excellence and benchmarking however remained. Higher education, and research universities in particular, were increasingly seen as agents of economic

development, as safeguards of and paths to prosperity. In this context, questions of effectiveness posed themselves, “value for money”, particularly because higher education had expanded markedly (Trow 1970) and the respective societies were at a loss on how to fund such systems. In the late 1970s, a study of the two polytechnic institutions in Switzerland (ETHZ and École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne [EPFL]) (Fritschi et al. 1977, 1980) investigated the link between size and productivity, and the hunch, presumably, was that size effects could play a role, so called economies of scale or agglomeration economies, in which case the institutional management would have to pay attention to them.<sup>1</sup> At the end of the 1980s the planning commission of ETHZ had speculated again that size and performance were related and had proposed to redistribute the available resources over an enlarged faculty. The reform plans were short-lived and failed to be implemented because they conflicted with the conservative posture and the guild-like partisanship of the incumbent faculty and their representatives.

Early in the 1990s, browsing in a local bookstore while attending one of the annual fora of the Association of Institutional Research (AIR) in the US, I encountered Gad Freudenthal’s anthology on Joseph Ben-David (1991). I immediately realized the significance of Ben-David’s researches for my own work. In 1995 I organized two conferences at my institution: the 17th Annual Forum of the European Association of Institutional Research (EAIR), the sister organization of AIR; and to profit from some of the scholars present, a smaller second conference was directed at a Swiss higher education audience. In this context, a range of higher education researchers presented papers, among them Martin Trow (1926–2007), whom Ben-David had encountered while spending a year in Berkeley, and Burton Clark (1921–2009); the papers of this conference, including some additional material, were published subsequently (Herbst et al. 1997).<sup>2</sup>

After my early retirement in the year 2000 I wanted to devote my time to matters other than higher education, but soon thereafter François da Pozzo, the now retired head of the *Centre d’études de la science et de la technologie* (CEST),<sup>3</sup> approached me with the idea of working on a study to compare MIT with ETHZ, two natural peer-institutions and, in the course of this comparison, to use bibliometric indicators that CEST had developed (Herbst et al. 2002). To assess possible dangers of misuse of bibliometric data, particularly in the context of performance-based budgeting and funding, CEST commissioned a second study (Herbst 2004) that was subsequently expanded and issued as a book (Herbst 2007).

This research transformed my daily routines, and I became ever more conscious of the dilemmas with which higher education or research systems were grappling. The idea evolved to organize a conference focusing on Ben-David’s legacy and to commemorate his 25th *Jahrzeit* (2011). Higher education or research systems are

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<sup>1</sup>The findings of that study were inconclusive, mainly for methodological reasons.

<sup>2</sup>I would like to express my indebtedness and deep gratitude to both of these scholars; for an overview of their work, see Clark (2008) and Trow (2010).

<sup>3</sup>Now part of the Swiss Science and Technology Council.

best understood comparatively, as viewed from the vantage point of the ‘outsider’, quasi-ethnographer or cultural anthropologist, and Joseph Ben-David was one of the few scholars in higher education research who had worked comparatively. His position in a sense was ideal. As a Jewish refugee from Hungary he could not that easily fraternize with, and feel part of, the tradition of the European or Humboldtian university he was unable to attend—although as a young immigrant to Palestine he attended the Hebrew University of Jerusalem which grew out of this tradition. His subsequent encounters with the British higher education system while enrolled at the London School of Economics on a scholarship from the British Mandate and his experience with US universities, particularly the University of California at Berkeley and the University of Chicago, must have provided him with a perspective few other scholars could muster.

Preparations started in 2007 to plan the conference. I had contacted Liah Greenfeld, a scholar of nationalism and modern culture at Boston University and presumably Ben-David’s last PhD-student, and she was impelled to co-organize a conference dedicated to her mentor’s legacy and to co-edit (sic) an associated anthology. Markus Christen from the Centre for Ethics at the University of Zürich agreed to participate; Michael Hagner, a professor of science studies at ETHZ, was brought on board; and one of Michael Hagner’s PhD-students at the time, Kijan Malte Espahangizi, was recruited as well. The five individuals (Christen, Espahangizi, Greenfeld, Hagner, Herbst) formed the program and the local organization committee for the planned conference. The *Centro Stefano Franscini*, the international conference centre of ETHZ located in southern Switzerland on the *Monte Verità*, a hill overlooking Ascona and the *Lago Maggiore*, agreed to host and to partially fund the conference. The remaining funds were donated by the “René and Susanne Braginsky Foundation”, by the Department of the Humanities, Social and Political Sciences of ETHZ, and by the Swiss *Studienstiftung*: I gratefully acknowledge their financial support. The conference entitled “The Role of the University in our Time: the Legacy of Joseph Ben-David as a Guideline for Today’s Challenges” took place in the summer of 2009 (Herbst 2009). Scholars from eleven countries and various disciplinary orientations participated. The conference eventually bore three publications, one in German (Gugerli et al. 2010), and the other two in English, i.e. one edited by Liah Greenfeld (2012) and the second one presented here.

A few acknowledgements are necessary. My focus on higher education developed rather late in my professional life, and I wouldn’t have been prepared to delve into a relatively new field without the earlier exposure to a range of mentors and scholars whose impact was formative. It is difficult to list a few among those who have supported me as a young person or whose ideas I had absorbed, but I should mention, above all, Arnold Niederer, Horst Rittel, Hanno Kesting, Lucius Burckhardt, Henry Hightower and Maynard Hufschmidt, teachers who had nurtured my critical thinking or quantitative—comprehensive, systemic—analyses; and Walter Isard, Kenneth E. Boulding, Russell L. Ackoff and C. West Churchman whose writings I had encountered in the 1960s; particularly Churchman, the philosopher in this group, had a significant impact on my thinking.

After I had joined ETHZ, I intensified my local contacts with colleagues whom I had known since the days of my concentration on optimization and systemic designs (operations research) to review higher education systems, specifically systems of research universities. The occasional discussions with Hans-Jakob Lüthi, and the regular exchange of ideas I had with Kurt Hässig or Hanspeter Eichenberger over coffee in the faculty club or over a plate of *chop-suey* in a nearby restaurant, were both elucidating and supportive; the debates within the planning commission of ETHZ, headed at the time by Konrad Osterwalder, were far-sighted; I came to know Herb Kells, and subsequently also Bob Simha and Martin Trow, all of whom have become personal friends; ETHZ profited from the visions of Jakob Nüesch (past president) and the tenacity of Katharina von Salis who had initiated ETHZ's first office of equal-opportunity (*Equal!*); and with colleagues like Burton Clark, François da Pozzo, Gary Matkin, Ian McNay, Terry Russell, Frank Schmidlein, Michael Shattock, Lydia Snover, Henry Wasser, and others, I had an enriching professional relationship.

Lastly, I should thank the various associates, friends and organizations that have contributed, directly or indirectly, to this volume: the people who had served on the organizing committee for the Monte Verità conference, particularly Michael Hagner; the sponsoring agencies (mentioned above) and the participants of that conference; Nicolas Carayol, Rivka Feldhay, Gad Freudenthal, Michel Haymann, Beate Kraus, Eric Kubli, Christoph Mandl, Mary Lou Mettler, Sandy Otis, Terry Russell, Thomas Schøtt, Chikako Takeishi, Nina Toren, Kurt Weiss, an anonymous reviewer and, of course, Miriam Ben-David. But above all, I want to thank my co-authors who stood steadfastly behind the project of this anthology and my family members (Jacqueline, my wife, and our children Rachel, Joshua and Rebecca) who supported me in my work on Ben-David—against all odds.

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April 2013

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