BOOK REVIEW

Academic star wars: Excellent initiatives in global perspectives, edited by Maria Yudkevich, Philip G. Altbach, and Jamil Salmi, Cambridge, MA, London, England, MIT Press, 2023, 271 pp., open access, ISBN 9780262376693 (pdf)

Academic excellence has long been a foundational principle for all the stakeholders involved in higher education: students and their families, faculty and staff, universities and agencies, employers and society at large. But what does 'academic excellence' mean? How it is defined and measured? What impact does it have in national and international contexts or in the short- and long-term perspectives? What is the link between academic excellence and university rankings? The pioneering book edited by Maria Yudkevich, Philip G. Altbach and Jamil Salmi elaborates on these and similar questions. The volume, which was published in late 2023 by MIT press and includes a free open-access option, is devoted to academic excellence initiatives (AEIs) from a global perspective.

"AEIs are state-funded programs that support – organizationally and financially – a limited number of universities" (Philip G. Altbach, Jamil Salmi, and Maria Yudkevich, p. 1). The book discusses nine cases written by renowned country experts, including (in their order of appearance in the book): Rui Yang on China, Akiyoshi Yonezawa on Japan, Chang Da Wan and Tien Hong Lim on Malaysia, Byung Shik Rhee and Meishan Yin on South Korea, Angela Yung Chi Hou on Taiwan, Lise Degn on Denmark, Andrée Sursock on France, Torger Möller and Stefan Hornbostel on Germany and Andrey Volkov, Yaroslav Kuzminov and Maria Yudkevich on Russia. This approach is often used in book projects led by Maria Yudkevich: 'asking some of the best higher education researchers all over the world to work collaboratively on a set of common themes and methodologies' (acknowledgements). The rationale of the volume is to provide a comprehensive analysis of AEIs globally and their impact on national higher education (HE) systems, then, based on this analysis, to suggest policy recommendations for university leaders and other decision-makers. According to the introduction, it addresses these issues:

- 'How does the idea of excellence vary across national systems, and what prompted the boost of AEIs all over the world?
- If there is such a thing as a successful AEI, is there a recipe for those who want to launch one, or at least some useful lessons from the experience of others?
- What are the general consequences (both intended and unintended) of these AEIs for participating universities and the rest of the HE system?
- Can one claim that AEIs can have a significant impact on the global standing of national HE systems?
- Do these AEIs represent a sustainable tool for the general development of national HE systems as a whole, and participating universities in particular?' (introduction).

The editors acknowledged in the introduction that they are 'aware that other countries have put in place funding approaches or programs that seek to achieve similar results as an AEI—namely, enhancing the capacity, output, and impact of their research universities—without having all the characteristics of a formal AEI'. Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the United Kingdom, the Excellence in Research Assessment (ERA) in Australia, New Zealand's Performance-Based Research fund (PBRF) as well as some initiatives in selected USA states are just some interesting examples in this regard.

What are the main takeaways from the book?

AEIs are diverse

Globally, AEIs have various designs, scopes of impact and outreach as well as budgets. China alone has so far spent more than half of all the other participant countries combined (about 100 billion USD). AEIs are diverse in the age of the academic systems in which they are implemented and their starting dates. The first university in Germany, for example – the Ruprecht-Karls-University Heidelberg – was established in 1386, while the first university in Malaysia – the University of Malaya – was founded only in 1949 (and remained the only university in the country until the late 1960s). The first AEIs started in China (1995) and South Korea (1999) (Salmi, Altbach and Yudkevich, p. 228) and were pushed by internal demands as well as national strategic concerns over economic and social development in the respective countries, while almost all of the other AEIs stemmed from external demands pushed by international rankings. Indeed, international rankings have played a crucial role in all AEIs globally; one program in Russia was even called "Project 5-100" for its explicit goal of placing five universities among the top 100 in the world. AEIs operate in academic systems of different sizes, from Denmark, which has only eight public universities, to China, which is home to more than 3,000 higher education institutions. Moreover, AEIs have varying modes of operation, from a goal such as establishing world-class universities (China - Rui Yang) to a method like contributing to the international competences of the country (Japan - Akiyoshi Yonezawa and Taiwan - Angela Yung Chi Hou). Some countries have multiple AEIs ongoing at the same time (China - Rui Yang, Taiwan - Angela Yung Chi Hou, Japan - Akiyoshi Yonezawa), while other countries are home to several repeated AEIs (France - Andrée Sursock, Germany - Torger Möller and Stefan Hornbostel, Malaysia - Chang Da Wan and Tien Hong Lim, South Korea - Byung Shik Rhee and Meishan Yin), and some just started with single AEIs (Denmark - Lise Degn, Russia - Andrey Volkov, Yaroslav Kuzminov and Maria Yudkevich).

Setting examples for others

AEIs can inspire other similar programs. The French administration under Nicolas Sarkozy (president from 2007 to 2012) took its inspiration from its neighbor, Germany, and its *Exzellenzinitiative* (first started in the 2005-06 academic year) to launch a bipartisan AEI of its own in 2010 (Torger Möller and Stefan Hornbostel, p. 152): The Investment Program for the Future (*Programme d'Investissements d'Avenir* − PIA). Indeed, both countries suffered from "Shanghai Shock" (see for example, Andrée Sursock, p. 153, p. 179): The Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), often referred to as the "Shanghai Ranking", thanks to its four creators affiliated with Shanghai Jiao Tong University, is the first currently prominent international benchmarking of academic excellence worldwide. In 2003, Germany's Humboldt University of Berlin, alma mater and/or workplace of more than fifty Nobel Laurates, was not among the first ranking of the 100 top universities, nor was the Ecole Polytechnique, the leading science and engineering school in France. AEIs can also have an unexpected domestic impact, as with the Russian AEI program called "Project 5-100" (2013-21): Initially, this program was aimed at only 21 universities, but ultimately, it led to changes in the entire assessment and evaluation system for all of the more than 700 private and public universities in the country. In addition, universities beyond the scope of excellence initiatives have to be taken into account, especially in times of massification. AEIs can even take inspiration from non-AEIs, as is the case with China's Tsinghua University, which compares itself against the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the United States (Rui Yang, p. 21).

AEIs and English

AEIs promote globalization and internationalization and at the same time strengthen the role of English as the lingua franca in academia. Yet formal AEIs cannot be found in a single Anglophone country. English is therefore not the first language of many of the stakeholders involved in these initiatives, which brings new challenges. In addition to increasing academic publishing primarily in English (with explicit targets in the journals *Nature* and *Science* in Malaysia - Chang Da Wan and

Tien Hong Lim, and both of these journals as well as *Cell* in South Korea - Byung Shik Rhee and Meishan Yin) this leads also to the increasing use of English as the language of instruction (while universities may be able to attract international students by offering instruction in languages other than English, the availability of courses and programs taught in English allows them to recruit a significant number of international students), the offering of English courses for faculty and staff and the introduction of English as an official language for internal research and administrative activities (as at the Advanced Institute for Materials Research (AIMR) of Tohoku University in Japan - Akiyoshi Yonezawa). On the other hand, the book notes, "the level of English proficiency among faculty [in Russia] did not allow most of them to conduct classes in English, read the academic literature, or communicate on professional topics with colleagues" (Andrey Volkov, Yaroslav Kuzminov and Maria Yudkevich, p. 205). There is plenty of academic research suggesting that academic papers are written and structured in national languages in a different way than they are in English; "China-specific research modes and argumentation style" (Rui Yang, p. 25), for example, were explicitly mentioned, but this is a global issue. The lack of (sufficient) knowledge of English can lead to many disadvantages and exclusion, something that many decision makers have taken into account. In France, for example, university site visits by international selection committees were "conducted in French in order to allow a larger circle of the university community to participate" (Andrée Sursock, p. 157).

AEIs and impact

Compared to long history of universities worldwide, many AEIs were set up for only a short period of time, and even in the countries where they were prolonged, it is difficult to measure their impact in meaningful and reliable way. Examples include the Double First Class University plan with adjustments every five years in China (Rui Yang), the permanent *Exzellenzinitiative* with evaluations every seven years in Germany, the ten-year World Premier International Research Center Initiative (WPI) in Japan (Akiyoshi Yonezawa), the five-year HIR (High Impact Research) program in Malaysia (Chang Da Wan and Tien Hong Lim), the BK21 project running every seven years in South Korea (Byung Shik Rhee and Meishan Yin), the five-year UNIK ("unique") Initiative in Denmark (Lise Degn), the eight-year 5-100 project in Russia (Andrey Volkov, Yaroslav Kuzminov and Maria Yudkevich) and calls every three years in France (Andrée Sursock) and every five years in Taiwan (Angela Yung Chi Hou). Instead, the progress of AEIs is measured by rankings. Here, China is probably the most successful case in the global competition, starting with 0 universities among the top 100 in 2004 (only eight were on the list at all) and reaching 7 (157 in total) in the ARWU and 6 (51 in total) in the QS Ranking in 2021 (Rui Yang, p. 25). In general, higher education ranking systems and the related "global ranking mania" (Rui Yang, p. 25) are too influential on higher education, even beyond the framework of AEIs, and this is not always good. AEIs have increased international recruitment and mobility significantly among students and faculty, including recruitment among diaspora, and decreased academic inbreeding. Though AEIs are often focused on excellence in research, there have been initiatives explicitly on excellence in teaching, including the *Initiatives d'excellence en formations innovantes* (IDEFI) in France (Andrée Sursock) and the Teaching Excellence Initiative in Taiwan (Angela Yung Chi Hou). AEIs have brought to light old domestic problems that are now more sensitive and visible, such as institutional autonomy, especially in France (Andrée Sursock), Germany (Torger Möller and Stefan Hornbostel) and Russia (Andrey Volkov, Yaroslav Kuzminov and Maria Yudkevich). In France, for example, there was a real fear that decision makers would give more preferences to their alma maters and universities outside of Paris would be disadvantaged (Andrée Sursock, p. 154).

Conclusion and Outlook

It is interesting to note that some continents – namely, Africa, Latin and North America – do not yet have similar initiatives, while other countries have initiatives with similar goals of supporting and maintaining excellent research universities, but without the formal establishment of AEIs. These include the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the United Kingdom, the Excellence in Research Assessment (ERA) in Australia, and New Zealand's Performance-Based Research fund (PBRF). In the future, it would be interesting to look at other cases of excellence beyond the AEI framework and the REF, ERA and PBRF programs in countries like the Netherlands or at individual universities like the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne in Switzerland, or to look more intensively at research institutions as well as the impacts on society at large mentioned by the editors at the book lunch on December 12, 2023, at the Center for International Higher Education (CIHE), Boston College, moderated by Gerardo L. Blanco (Book Launch, 2023). More attention should be paid to the interesting names that AEIs have in their countries, from plain and simple names like the *Exzellenzinitiative* in Germany to the more elaborate ones like the 21st Century Centers of Excellence (21st Century CoE) in Japan, the Accelerated Programme for Excellence (AREX) in Malaysia, the Development Plan for World Class Universities and Research Centers of Excellence in Taiwan, as well as those that hide important information in their names, like "Project 211" in China, referring to 100 universities for the twenty first century, or "BK21" in South Korea, meaning "Brain Korea". The book is an excellent reflection on nine cases from Asia and Europe as well as excellent reading for scholars, practitioners and anyone else thinking about starting AEIs in their countries and beyond.

The book starts with a famous quote from Leo Tolstoy: "All happy families are alike, but every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (*Anna Karenina*, 1878), implying that AEIs are indeed excellent in their own way. I would like to finish my review with another quote from the same book: "to educate the people, three things are needed: schools, schools and schools." Currently there are more than 25,000 universities globally, 1,200 of which are research based, including a tiny percentage of excellence initiatives, but this tiny percentage is "central to the global knowledge economy and the production and the dissemination of new knowledge" (Philip G. Altbach, Jamil Salmi, and Maria Yudkevich, p. 9).

References:

Book Launch (2023). Academic Star Wars - Excellence Initiatives in Global Perspective. CIHE - Center for International Higher Education. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jK1U_viNcrg

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