

Book Review: Higher Education, Policy, and the Global Competition Phenomenon

Edited by Laura M. Portnoi, Val D. Rust, and Sylvia S. Bagley.
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This welcome addition to Palgrave Macmillan's *International and Development Education Series* examines the complexity inherent in decision-making and hence policy implementation for today's institutes of higher education due to the global competition phenomenon. The volume consists of 16 chapters following the editors' introduction. Each chapter focuses on a different aspect of how competition influences higher education in a variety of contexts both geographically and philosophically.

Overall the volume posits that universities did not choose to participate in the competition phenomenon but rather are reactive participants to forces that have resulted from the open-market system in which education has become a commodity to trade. Universities are faced with two major issues: competing for ever-limited resources whether in the form of decreasing national funding budgets or international student numbers, and the race for higher rankings to establish merit as a world class institution and hence receive greater access increasingly limited resources. Although varying opinions exist on the ranking scales currently used, multiple contributors agree that universities will have to cope with rankings for some time to come. As stated by Ntshoe and Letseka's Chapter 5 in their discussion of quality assurance trends both globally and the local reaction in South Africa, "if an institution does not produce its own ranking it should not be surprised that others are going to do so for it" (64).

The inability for universities to escape from this ranking competition has reformulated how institutions view collaborative alliances. In his analysis of the annual report as a form of quality assurance, Ramirez (Chapter 4) provides the example of how collaborative endeavors in the form of multi-authored articles now are "ranked" by order of author contribution. While this may appear competitive, it does provide a more concise indicator of accountability. Thus competition does provide universities with an opportunity to rethink rationales and policy. A very succinct discussion on how internationalization is contributing to this shift in motivations and expectations as collaborative and/or competitive agents is examined by Knight (Chapter 15).

Many author contributions reflect the tension institutes of higher education are facing as they try to steer the prevailing market forces by applying policy decisions that serve the greater public good. Oliver and Nguyen (Chapter 10) center their discussion of competition as a two-edged sword in the context of Vietnam's higher education policy. Rationales, policies, and practices are quite different by region as illustrated in de Wit and Adams' comparative study of Australia and Europe (see Chapter 16). Mohrman and Wang (Chapter 12) take the discussion to China and examine the tension that exists when government intervention to create world class universities may bring the prestige of stellar research to an elite few at the cost of adequately preparing the next generation of undergraduate students. The question of how far and in what ways competition for world rankings should steer academic policy is thus a key issue examined throughout the volume.

In a discussion of the university knowledge economy decrees, Marginson notes "universities should do what they and only they are best at: curiosity-driven creativity and research training" (33). Although there are varying strategies to this approach, new players are emerging with significant results. Welch (Chapter 11) documents the Southeast Asia response to the competition for world rankings and shows that as a result the quality of scientific research institutions as well as university-industry research in Malaysia is now within close proximity of the developed country average. Gertel and Jacobo (Chapter 6) however express concern that in Argentina this has led to a situation where national budgets to ensure excellence in teaching are no longer from supply-driven university funds but demand-driven research projects (80).

While there are success stories, a myriad of issues remain that must be addressed. The volume begins with a concise chapter by Ilon (Chapter 2) on how higher education has responded to global economic dynamics. As universities try to adhere to the simple tenet of increasing returns for less expense, collaborative alliances provide an added allure. Ameen, Chapman and Al-Barwani (Chapter 7) provide a critical analysis of this tension in Oman. Collaborative efforts may also result in foreign curriculum that

conflicts with the national mission of higher education institutes. Shuyler and Vavrus (Chapter 13), in their discussion of higher education in Tanzania, claim that while it is commendable to prepare youth with globally-competitive skills, the reality is that this will hinder entrance into national institutes of higher education whose gates are opened only to those who pass severe national exams requiring rote memorization.

Further discussion on this tension is provided by Stetar and colleagues (Chapter 14) who examine the use of “soft power” to promote national agendas through the provision of higher education. They provide key discussion on the tension found in geographical areas such as Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan which are receiving attention from not only Russia and China but now also the United States in the competition for international student enrollments. Further discussion of the emerging hubs for higher education is examined by Shields and Edwards (Chapter 17) who posit that student mobility is constantly being reshaped as the increase in student mobility results in an increase in competition between universities for those students and hence new patterns of mobility emerge. As they state, “the true measure of whether competition truly ‘works’ may ultimately be in whether it can expand opportunities for the masses while maintaining the prospects of social mobility and innovation that have driven the phenomenal growth of universities around the world” (246).

One of the strongest assets of this volume is the inclusion of not only prolific scholars in higher education but also upcoming and new authentic voices. Authors from Argentina, Australia, Azerbaijan, China, Europe, Kyrgyzstan, Oman, South Africa, and Vietnam as well as extensive researchers in Kenya, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Tanzania, and the United Arab Emirates provide the reader with a true opportunity to assess how various actors are responding to the global competition phenomenon. That being said, one of the weaknesses of the volume may be that chapters tend to be brief and do not appear to be organized in any specific order. The editors compensate for this slight in a very concise introduction which is a necessity to read in order to understand how the chapters interrelate, compliment, and perhaps contradict each other thus resounding the claim that collaborative alliances bring forth both opportunity and tension.

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