

Ben Wildavsky. The Great Brain Race: How Global Universities are Reshaping the World. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. 240pp. Cloth: \$26.95. ISBN: 978-0-691-14689-8.

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Those who liked *The World is Flat* (Friedman, 2005) will probably like *The Great Brain Race*. Its journalistic style is accessible, almost beach reading. It covers why global higher education is important; how the 'race' for university notoriety is emerging in Asia and Europe, the public perception of 'world class universities' and why they are so difficult to obtain. Further, it delves into the nature of international rankings, how for-profit colleges and universities are filling a unique niche, and why issues of free trade in postsecondary education services are important. In the course of writing the book, the author has interviewed most of the major personalities in international higher education -- Jamil Salmi, William Tierney, Andreas Schleicher, Ed Fiske, Phil Altbach, Daniel Fallon, Peggy Blumenthal, Jan Sadlak, Daniel Levy, and Simon Marginson. Additionally, he has spoken with the leadership of the Association of Public and Land Grant Universities, the American Association of Colleges and Universities, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), the Center for Higher Education Development (CHE), the California Institute of Technology, Qatar Foundation for Education, the School of International and Public Affairs (Columbia University). He has sat through a (fascinating) seminar on "the relationship of government and religion" taught in Abu Dhabi by the president of New York University. This book, to say the least, has mastered the territory.

Other than entertainment value however the book has two principal assets, and one problematic drawback.

One asset is the book's strongest chapter, which concerns international ranking. The author was the editor of the U.S. News and World Report ranking system in the mid-2000's and his knowledge of this arena is unprecedented. He begins the story of college rankings in 1895 and works his way through the many new international ranking systems and their various weaknesses and strengths. To his credit he does not attempt to sell the notion of ranking. A helpful distinction is made between ranking and rating, between science weighting systems (Shanghai Jiao Tong) and those which place weight on the humanities (Times Higher Education). Distinctions are also made between empirical (THE) and 'more holistic' methods (Fiske and Yale guides). New outcomes initiatives from the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) and the Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO), originally drawn from the U.S. Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) are discussed in depth. For reasons of accountability, Wildavsky's conclusion is that more outcome assessments should be expected. Criticisms of particular ranking systems and of ranking in general are spelled out. The author specifies each objection and distortion created by systems of both ranking and rating but in the end advises readers that both will be an increasing part of the higher education landscape for the foreseeable future. In sum, he advises his readers to know the characteristics each system but not slavishly follow their mandates. Unique high quality is its own reward.

What makes this approach to international higher education so lively is the combination between professional mastery of the material alongside interviews with those involved in the process. Therein lays the book's second principal asset. Ranking systems, for instance, are discussed with the rectors of INSEAD (Institut Européen d'administration des affaires), the China-Europe International Business School, London School of Economics, KAUST (King Abdullah University of Science and Technology), and the Indian Institute of Technology. For-profit education is analyzed but then described

by senior officials at Raffles Education, Laureate, De Vry, Sylvan Learning, and India's IT training firm Aptech.

More problematic is what the book leaves out. It hardly mentions the role which the World Trade Organization plays in the lowering of education trade barriers. The (often vehement) objections to WTO's role are given short shrift. The ethical requirements for achieving world class universities are not even mentioned. The absence of world class ethical standards may prevent China from achieving a world class university and, as Europe tries to incorporate the highly corrupt universities in the former Soviet Union, it may bring the Bologna Process to a halt. The absence of discussion of these issues is a significant drawback.

The book is strong on the elements of elite universities but fails to point out the international role and function for community and teaching colleges. It is full of detail on the elements which make a university a candidate for world class status, but then it fails to mention that acquiring world class universities has sector and regulatory prerequisites. The book tends to lean toward the 'gee-wiz' type descriptions of the role of world class universities in the Middle East, with all the advantages of easy money, but does not enter deeply into the cultural and philosophical contradictions which they engender, the question being whether a world class university can exist a society characterized by social exclusion and theological hegemony. While the problems of opening up branch campuses are listed, the numerous failures and catastrophes in opening up branch campuses are all but ignored. The book would have been stronger had it interviewed as many university presidents who made the mistake of investing in overseas campuses as it interviewed those who are bullish on the prospects. For some reason the book ignores the many instances of for-profit fraud, both international and domestic and the debate over whether the public should support (through loans and grants) students who wish to study at a for-profit higher education institution. The book has nothing to say about the absence of international oversight in international education, and the prospects for adjudicating differences across nations in what to allow. The book does not mention the issue of civil rights in international education, for instance whether a nation should have the right to forbid an adult citizen from purchasing the education h/she wants. The book is fluent about the virtues of competition of programs and curricula but has nothing to say about the dangers of curricular extremism, intolerance, and threats to social cohesion which could piggyback onto the international education trade.

In essence, the book lives up to its title, that it is about global universities. But for coverage of policies which pertain to university competition the reader will need to look elsewhere.

References:

Friedman, Thomas (2005) The World Is Flat. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.