In this chapter, the issue editors set the stage for the chapters that follow by delineating recent developments in higher education and common strategies for creating globally competitive higher education institutions. The editors consider social justice concerns that arise with global competition and contend that contextualized priorities can and should mediate global trends.

Setting the Stage: Global Competition in Higher Education

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Higher education institutions (HEIs) across the world are functioning within an increasingly globalized and competitive landscape (Marginson, 2006; Portnoi, Bagley, & Rust, 2013; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Globalization—a broadly used and nebulous term—has been conceptualized in numerous ways, with various scholars focusing on its social, political, cultural, and/or economic manifestations (Steger, 2013). Despite contestation regarding its definition, most scholars and observers would agree that globalization is multidimensional and that its effects have accelerated in recent decades, due in part to tremendous technological advances (Robinson, 2007). Technological progress has led to the development of a global knowledge economy, or “k-economy,” with an emphasis on knowledge production and knowledge-intensive activities (Gürüz, 2008; Marginson, 2013; Rizvi, 2004).

Globalization and the rise of the k-economy have significantly impacted the higher education sector, especially when coupled with the neoliberal economic environment that prevails worldwide. With its emphasis on corporatization, privatization, accountability, and limited government intervention, neoliberalism has led to a significant shift away from the social democratic values that governed higher education previously (Chapter 2 by Hazelkorn in this volume; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Higher education is increasingly tied to national economic prowess in this competitive context, resulting in a host of market-driven trends within the sector, including increased privatization, strategic interaction between higher education and industry, and more managerial forms of governance. At the same time, the World Trade Organization’s General Agreement on
Trade in Services has made higher education a tradable commodity (Shields & Edwards, 2013). Within this environment, knowledge and knowledge production have marked significance, leading both governments and HEIs to place increased emphasis on building research capacity for human capital development and national economic advancement (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

**Global Ranking Schemes and Global University Models**

The competitive higher education environment has led to a race for global stature and the emergence of several highly publicized global ranking schemes, beginning in 2003—most notably Shanghai Jiao Tong University’s *Academic Ranking of World Universities* (ARWU) and the *Times Higher Education* (THE) rankings. The Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) *World University Rankings*, formerly joined with THE, is another key contender. Additional rankings have proliferated in recent years, as Hazelkorn discusses in Chapter 2 of this volume. These ranking mechanisms are both a result of increased competition and a driver of further competition (Portnoi & Bagley, 2011). Scholars and commentators have raised key concerns about the validity, reliability, and methods of HEI rankings, particularly due to their focus on publications in specific English-language journals (see, e.g., Marginson, 2013; Ntsohe & Letseka, 2013). Accordingly, questions arise regarding rankings’ elitism and the narrow notion of what constitutes “excellence” in higher education (Bagley & Portnoi, 2012). Nonetheless, global rankings influence higher education decision making on multiple levels—including prioritization of funding and resources—thus rendering them significant to understanding developments related to global competition (Hazelkorn, 2008, Chapter 2 of this volume).

Global ranking schemes tend to valorize one particular type of HEI, resulting in a corresponding trend toward global university models of “top” players. Marginson (2006) delineated the globally focused missions, priorities, research, and interconnectivity of Global Research Universities (GRUs), critical to many nations’ missions to remain key players in the global k-economy. Similarly, Mohrman, Ma, and Baker (2008) analyzed the *Emerging Global Model* (EGM), which encompasses global missions, increasing complexity, worldwide recruitment, international collaboration, diversified funding, increased interaction between government and industry, industry-centered roles for professors, and a prevailing emphasis on high-impact research. Clearly, global stature and research are central to these influential models of elite institutions that many other HEIs endeavor to emulate.

**Common Strategies for Increasing Global Competitiveness**

Governments and HEIs utilize six common strategies, separately or in combination, as they strive for global competitiveness (Portnoi & Bagley, 2011).
First, they may develop world-class universities similar to GRU or EGM institutions—prestigious research institutions that play a key role in creating and disseminating knowledge and producing a highly skilled global workforce (Altbach & Salmi, 2011). Governments may create world-class universities by prioritizing funds for improving a small number of preexisting elite institutions, as China has done, or by building new institutions from the ground up (Salmi, 2009). Russia, for instance, announced the goal of having at least five Russian universities placed among the top 100 global HEIs by 2020 (Vorotnikov, 2013), whereas King Abdullah University in Saudi Arabia, established in 2009, is a new institution seeking world-class status. A related strategy numerous countries employ is merging institutions to form larger, more powerful “players.” A third strategy—regional alliances—involves nations or HEIs joining forces across regions to enhance their viability on the global stage (Beerkens, 2004).

A fourth key strategy nations and HEIs employ when seeking to enhance their global status is internationalization, defined as “the process of integrating international, intercultural, and global dimensions” into higher education (Knight, 2004, p. 9). A fifth strategy is cross-border offerings—including international branch campuses, joint degrees, and distance education. Finally, prioritizing the quality of higher education services by implementing or strengthening quality assurance measures designed to assess the performance of HEIs is an additional strategy for increasing global stature. Quality assurance, which may include accreditation processes, is one of the most ubiquitous tactics HEIs or nations utilize, as they may implement measures to improve service to local “consumers” and/or to enhance global competitiveness. This final strategy highlights how local priorities interact with the dominant forces of global competition.

**Contextualizing Trends Toward Global Competition**

Although global competition trends are evident, they are not monolithic and are consistently mediated by context-specific realities (Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Appadurai, 1996; Portnoi & Bagley, 2011; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Not all countries and HEIs can (or should) base their missions on existing GRU or EGM university models. Indeed, as we have found in our ongoing content analysis of over 200 national education policy documents, countries and HEIs select strategies relevant to their local contexts and adapt them to their needs.

With the exception of nations that have decentralized governments (e.g., Germany and the United States), more established countries tend to have specific, stand-alone higher education policies that include strategic priorities reflecting global competition trends. For example, the Republic of Ireland’s (2011) “National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030” refers to regional and international comparisons and seeks to position the country’s higher education system as a world leader in quality. Yet Ireland’s
policy highlights other localized priorities, including improving teaching and learning, maintaining engagement with society, and increasing offerings for a diverse population. This policy displays both dominant global competition trends and context-specific priorities.

Many developing countries, conversely, address higher education as part of a broader policy framework. Reflecting the influence of the World Bank and other donor agencies, developing and postcolonial countries’ education policies—as well as those of some of the Arab States (notably Iraq, Qatar, Turkey, and Yemen)—tend to focus primarily on higher education’s role in national social and economic development. In Ethiopia and Qatar, for example, a key concern is the need for higher education to contribute to national development (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2010; Qatar General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2011). Assuring the quality of a nation’s HEIs may be critical for becoming a global competitor, but it may also signal compliance with donor objectives or attempts to gain legitimacy prior to entering the reputation race. Placement on global rankings might be a longer term goal or consideration, but it often does not play a prominent role in these countries’ education policies.

Social Justice and Equity Concerns

A primary social justice concern when considering global competition in higher education is whether HEIs in all countries have a legitimate chance to compete in the zero-sum rankings “game” with established global players. Based on their postcolonial or postconflict situations, many countries are starting from a different geopolitical position; in other words, the playing field is not level. Although less established countries may be slowly improving their HEIs, dominant countries continue to improve theirs at the same time, keeping the gap between more developed and less developed countries intact.

With hundreds of HEIs striving to either place or increase their stature on numerous global rankings, the drive toward meeting externally determined criteria, with a skewed emphasis on research and elite status, has become stronger than ever. What seems to be lost in the “reputation race” (van Vught, 2008, p. 169) is a focus on other critical mandates of HEIs—such as meeting the needs of local communities and providing affordable, high-quality education to citizens. Lemann (2014) highlighted the severity of this conceptual split in the competing purposes of higher education—providing world-class higher education while also offering education to the masses. Many countries struggle to prioritize limited education resources, facing the competing goals of becoming more internationally recognized while simultaneously meeting the needs of local residents. For instance, providing funding to secure high-level faculty members—who are central to maintaining HEIs’ status as world-class research universities—necessarily means that those funds will not be prioritized for broadening access. Indeed, this
essential struggle to remain both locally and globally relevant appears to be endemic to the very enterprise of higher education in the 21st century.

Furthermore, the missions and aspirations of postcolonial or post-conflict nations will necessarily look different from those of industrialized nations. In countries with numerous HEIs, there is greater opportunity to attend to developing world-class institutions while also offering higher education to the masses through lower cost options. A war-torn nation like Afghanistan, however, must focus on restoring and improving the infrastructure and quality of its higher education system so that it can once again serve as a solid pillar for national development (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Higher Education, 2009).

The increasing dominance of market-driven measures within the higher education sector raises additional questions about social justice and equity. With specialized recruiters at top universities marketing their HEIs to international students, conflicts have emerged between meeting institutions’ financial goals and addressing prospective students’ needs (Redden, 2014). In addition, marketing top universities to wealthy international students perpetuates global inequalities regarding access to higher education for individuals within and between countries. Ultimately, such tactics highlight the fact that managing HEIs and systems from a market-driven perspective may compromise other equity-driven goals and priorities.

Conclusion: Challenging the Competitive Higher Education Environment

Although global competition appears to be firmly entrenched in the higher education sector, we contend that local forces can and will continue to mediate dominant trends and strategies. In a recent commentary for University World News, Marginson (2014) noted that Western hegemony in higher education will not last forever and highlighted the need to understand the local histories, cultural norms, and dominant languages of other education systems. Focusing on local realities and needs may not fully address the social justice concerns we have raised, which are indicative of the broader neoliberal environment. Nevertheless, contextualized responses allow countries and HEIs to define excellence on their own terms and provide other countries and HEIs with a wider perspective on alternatives to the status quo. We remain convinced that the competitive, hierarchical nature of higher education and the resulting drive toward global competition can and should be challenged.

References


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