



The Transformative Impact of Academic Excellence Initiatives

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The emergence of global university rankings has prodded many university leaders to join the global prestige race and pressured governments to launch national programs called “academic excellence initiatives” (AEIs). They stand out from regular investment programs aimed at building research capacity. First, they are a relatively recent phenomenon. Except for China, which started on that path in the early 1990s, all the other AEIs were launched in the past 15 years. Second, AEIs target universities rather than research institutes. Third, one of the basic characteristics of AEIs is their competitive nature, resulting in winners and losers when it comes to accessing the additional funding available.

Rationale for Launching Academic Excellence Initiatives

The AEIs that started before the emergence of global league tables, namely in China in 1995 and in South Korea in 1999, had more of an endogenous character, reflecting a long-term national strategic concern about economic development. By contrast, the second wave of AEIs was induced by external considerations linked to perceived competitive

Abstract

Academic Excellence Initiatives, government-sponsored programs to build world-class research-oriented universities, have become common in recent decades. These AEIs have had a significant impact on some of the countries in which they have been implemented. This article discusses the broad configurations of AEIs and addresses their success and the main problems encountered.

disadvantage in comparison with the more stellar performance of the top US and UK universities.

The second wave happened at a time when the concept of “world-class university” started to gain traction as a strategy for developing the capacity to compete in the global higher education scene through the creation of advanced scientific knowledge. Global standing has become an increasingly important concern for institutions around the world and for policymakers.

In terms of geographical distribution, most of the AEIs have taken place in Europe and East Asia, as the world-class university phenomenon has found little traction elsewhere.

Shift in Funding Allocation Models

AEIs represented a major change in the sense that entire universities were invited to apply for additional funding on a competitive basis, with no guarantee of success. A related, noteworthy feature of the selection process is delegating decision-making to groups of independent experts, including foreign scientists in many cases except China. The most common approach is to involve a thorough peer review process to select the best proposals.

Most governments that launched an AEI gradually realized that upgrading research universities was a long-term process that required more than one round of dedicated funding. The longest series of AEIs has happened in China, spanning the past three decades, and South Korea over more than 20 years.

Resource Mobilization

The resources mobilized to fund AEIs have come exclusively from the public purse, with some innovative features in a few countries. The German excellence initiative involved a partnership between the federal government and the state governments. Perhaps the most original model is the French AEI, where funding is provided through a large endowment (equivalent to USD 9.5 billion) whose yearly yield provides the resources allocated to the beneficiary universities. This approach offers an element of long-term financial sustainability that is absent in other AEIs.

In terms of funding volume, countries exhibit large disparities. China stands out in terms of the large proportion of additional resources going to the country’s top universities in the context of several successive AEIs.

It is interesting to note the contrast between Europe and Asia when deciding whether private universities are eligible for AEI funding. In Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, both public and private universities were eligible to compete, and a significant number of private universities received funding to develop their research capacity.

Push for Internationalization

A common feature of all AEIs has been to support accelerated internationalization to attract top talent and reduce academic inbreeding by offering generous remuneration packages and leading-edge scientific facilities to foreign researchers and granting scholarships to international graduate students. Beneficiary universities have brought back outstanding academics from the diaspora, notably in China, France, Germany, and South Korea.

Results and Impact of Academic Excellence Initiatives

Measuring the impact of excellence initiatives is not an easy task. First, upgrading a university takes many years, eight to 10 at the very least. Since many excellence initiatives are fairly recent, attempts at measuring success could be premature in most cases. The second challenge is related to attribution. Establishing whether and how AEIs actually caused the positive changes that can be observed would require an in-depth evaluation.

Progress of Beneficiary Universities

The results of the Shanghai ranking are a proxy measure of how research-intensive universities have performed over the past 20 years. China shows the most remarkable rise, from no university in the top 200 in 2004 to seven institutions among the top 100 in 2022. Denmark now has two universities in the top 100 (from one in 2004). France has kept the same number of universities, whereas Germany and Japan lost three and two, respectively.

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The first and perhaps foremost effect of AElS is that they have built a critical mass of outstanding faculty and top students. Beneficiary universities have made serious efforts to attract highly qualified researchers. They have also become more selective in terms of enrollment into their master and PhD programs.

In terms of additional funding, China is in a category of its own, as the scale of investment is gigantic compared to any other country in the world. China has become the largest producer of scientific articles, overtaking the United States and the United Kingdom. In other countries, the main gain may not have been the additional resources received. Rather, beneficiary universities have enjoyed more public recognition nationally and accrued prestige internationally.

The lack of governance reforms that would accompany and facilitate efforts toward research excellence appears to be one of the missing elements of AElS, with a few exceptions. In Germany, a healthy debate about structural governance barriers led to governance reforms in a few states. In Denmark, a radical governance reform took place in the early 2000s, giving universities more institutional autonomy. In Japan and Taiwan, governance reforms to bring more management flexibility also took place.

An aspect of governance that has not been touched by AElS is the mode of selecting university leaders. In countries where university presidents are elected democratically—France and Germany for example—this taboo issue has not been raised officially, even though it could be a limitation when it comes to empowering visionary and bold leaders for long-term transformation strategies. In countries where university leaders are directly appointed by the government, as happens in China, Malaysia, or Russia, there is a risk of appointment decisions based on political considerations rather than professional qualifications.

Academic freedom is also a governance dimension worth considering because of the tension between the search for excellence and the constraints resulting from political interference. It is doubtful that top universities can sustainably maintain outstanding scientific production when academic freedom is restricted.

By and large, AElS have generated significant improvements in terms of internationalization. This has translated into higher proportions of international graduate students and postdocs, master and doctoral programs taught in English, recruitment of foreign academics and researchers from the diaspora, and collaborative research projects with foreign partners. Another positive result in many beneficiary universities has been a visible reduction in academic inbreeding.

Conclusion

Studies of AElS have revealed a sense of “no turning back” in many countries. In the context of increased scrutiny of university performance by governments, university leaders have found ways to make their institutions more distinctive in terms of research themes, teaching excellence, and linkages with the economy to foster their competitive advantage.

While recognizing that global rankings and AElS have contributed to a higher level of competition among universities, the virtues of cooperation should not be lost on university leaders. Increased collaborations between research teams across universities can boost research. They are also indispensable when addressing scientific questions that are of a regional or global nature, such as climate-related phenomena and communicable diseases.

There is a need for a broader definition of academic excellence than the one promoted by AElS. Instead of focusing narrowly on scientific publications in elite journals, leading research universities should adhere to the principles of social inclusion, scientific truth, ethical values, responsible research, and global solidarity as moral pillars of their social commitment. These dimensions may be difficult to measure through rankings but they are fundamental to the mission of world-class universities. Finally, AElS are not a substitute for reforms when it comes to strengthening higher education systems. Excellence initiatives primarily aim to support the development of globally competitive research-intensive universities. This can be complemented by system-wide reforms that would enhance equity and inclusion, promote innovative educational models, ensure sustainable financing, and modernize governance. ▲

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