



Academic Star Wars: Excellence Initiatives in Asia and Europe

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Abstract

Academic excellence initiatives have been introduced around the world in an effort to quickly improve research universities, research culture, and the rankings of top universities. *Academic Star Wars*, a recently published book, examines nine case studies of such initiatives in Europe and Asia. The AElS impact on academic culture, productivity, and in some cases governance has been significant.

Preoccupied by the low standing of their top universities in the global rankings, a small number of countries have in the past decades engaged in large-scale government-funded academic excellence initiatives (AEIs) to boost research productivity and output. A newly published book, *Academic Star Wars: Excellence Initiatives in Global Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023—[available free in open access](#)) analyzes excellence initiatives in nine countries across the world.

These countries expended approximately USD 100 billion to finance these AEIs. At least half that amount was spent in China, which also achieved dramatic success in boosting its research university sector and, not coincidentally, its position in the rankings. The goals, scope, funding—and success, or failure, of the initiatives—vary considerably. The cases show a variety of serendipitous positive results as well. It is perhaps significant that there were no AEIs in the Anglophone world, and also none in the Western Hemisphere or Africa.

Excellence That Is Measured by Rankings

The Russian 5-100 initiative was not unique in concretely mentioning rankings in the aims of the program. Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe declared in 2013 his intentions to have 10 Japanese universities rank in the top 100 in the world in 10 years (by 2023) as a symbolic indicator of the recovery of Japan's economy. Similarly, in France and Germany, the AEIs were very much a reaction to the lack of visibility of their universities in the top 50 in the global rankings.

Thus, "rankings consciousness" is central to many, if not most of the AEIs. While many in the academic community are skeptical about the relevance of rankings as a meaningful metric for measuring excellence, policy makers and the public almost without exception see these rankings as a key sign of success and a justification for allocating resources to AEIs.

Internationalization

Internationalization is considered the key element of all AEIs. Their design often assumed a direct push toward international competition and global visibility and provided incentives for institutions and individuals to make progress in this area. Internationalization has two main aspects. The most relevant for AEIs is the internationalization of research through jointly authored articles and research projects and the mobility of graduate students, professors, and researchers. These are all signs of the internationalization of science and scholarship. However, in some countries such as Japan, internationalization is a challenge due to language, traditions, and other barriers.

Progress in internationalization is often measured by clear quantitative indicators, such as number of joint articles or proportion of foreign academics/students. South Korea used as quantitative indicators of internationalization the proportion of courses, programs, and dissertations in English, intensive short-term seminars taught by foreign scholars, and the number of presentations at international conferences. Similar techniques were used by the Russian 5-100 participating universities.

Governance and the Role of Government

In most AEI programs, the government plays a key role not just as the main source of funding but also because it defines the rules and goals of the game. Governments demand more accountability from universities. As a 2026 Danish governmental act puts

it, “universities that are doing well should be rewarded. And poor quality should have consequences.”

Such direct government involvement has raised concerns in most AEIs. The Taiwanese case shows that it has likely diluted social trust and raised anxiety in the university community. This reinforces a situation in which the definition of excellence is translated into simple indicators such as positions in the global university rankings to demonstrate impact, quality, and performance. Japan, Malaysia, and Russia are clear examples of a top-down approach to program implementation.

At the same time, with the government playing the key role, in most cases AEIs do not substantially increase the involvement of industry and do not help universities to become more financially sustainable. This correlates with the fact that governance models have not changed much, reflecting a continuing hierarchical relationship between universities and the state.

Impact

Evidence suggests that AEIs have had a substantial influence on the performance of beneficiary universities, increasing their efficiency, research output, competitiveness, and global visibility. They also impact the allocation and concentration of talent—faculty and students alike. Furthermore, AEIs have had a positive effect on other universities and national research systems in general. AEIs have increased academic mobility and created more opportunities for early-career researchers. Less measurable are the soft, but perhaps equally important effects of the AEIs. These effects include a greater drive for excellence, a stronger competitive spirit, and an increasing role of leading universities in national and regional development.

Significant Concerns

At the same time, case studies reveal a number of concerns. Some cases clearly show that it is doubtful that the observed changes are sustainable without permanent funding. Another concern is the tension between local and global values (since the world-class model is associated with the North American model of research-intensive university). Reaching high positions in rankings may mean becoming similar to Western universities, especially in terms of resources, standards, performance indicators, and organizational/governance patterns. The China, Japan, and Taiwan cases raise concerns about this aspect. Academic freedom is another issue. Does participation in AEIs bring more autonomy and academic freedom? In China and Russia, it seems that participation in AEIs brought more institutional autonomy on matters relating to teaching, research, and staffing, while the government continues to exercise strict control and restrain academic freedom, especially in the humanities and social sciences which were largely ignored in most AEIs. There is also a concern in some countries that the concentration of resources in a small number of universities may starve the rest of the national higher education system. Regional inequalities have also been noted in France, Russia, and South Korea, with metropolitan universities getting most of the additional funding. The Taiwan case study showed a weak connection between universities and local communities in the pursuit of academic excellence. In Germany, the autonomy of academic units has created tensions between centers of excellence benefiting from the national excellence initiative and those not involved. These areas are all highlighted in the book.

Concluding Comments

While there has been emphasis on rankings when shaping AEIs in general, the case studies show that these initiatives bring more benefits when they focus on national and institutional goals, and use rankings only as reference points for comparison with other institutions and countries. There is a need for a more comprehensive concept of academic excellence that would not be linked narrowly to scientific publications in elite journals but that would promote scientific truth and responsible research. ▲

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