

# As western universities set up campuses in China and UAE, the fight to attract the brightest and best continues

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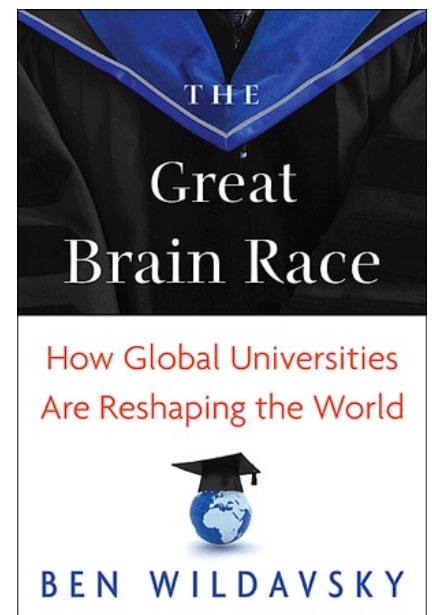
*In **The Great Brain Race**, Ben Wildavsky presents an account of how international competition for the brightest minds is transforming the world of higher education. Wildavsky shows that as international universities strive to become world-class, the new global education marketplace is providing more opportunities to more people than ever before. Drawing on extensive reporting in China, India, the United States, Europe, and the Middle East, the book considers the rapid spread of branch campuses, the growth of for-profit universities, and the controversial expansion of college rankings. **Matthew Partridge** discovers that the author has missed some key initiatives, however.*



**The Great Brain Race: How Global Universities are Reshaping the World. By Ben Wildavsky. Princeton University Press. April 2010.**

In David Lodge's 1984 Booker-listed novel *Small World*, one of the main protagonists, Professor Morris Zapp, declares that "the world is a global campus... the American Express card has replaced the library pass". Just over twenty-five years later Ben Wildavsky investigates the globalisation of Higher Education, and implicitly whether Lodge's vision has come to fruition, in *The Great Brain Race: How Global Universities are Reshaping the World*. Wildavsky, currently affiliated to both the [Brookings Institution](#) and [Kauffman Foundation](#), is highly qualified for this task since he has covered universities during his career as reporter for, and editor of, several newspapers and magazines.

*The Great Brain Race* is divided into six chapters, with an introduction and afterword. The opening chapter focuses on the internationalisation of student bodies, and the competition between institutions for overseas students. Chapter Two examines the trend for established institutions in developed countries to start satellite campuses in areas where demand for higher education is high, usually (but not exclusively) in less developed countries. The remaining chapters look at competition between countries for "world class" status, attempts to create an international system of university rankings and the rise of profit-making institutions.



As expected from someone with his experience and contacts, Wildavsky's work is engaging, fast-moving and packed full of interviews and case studies. Indeed, twenty pages are devoted to an in-depth look at two attempts to establish branches of Western universities in the Middle-East; [New York University's campus in Abu Dhabi](#) (from the perspective of NYU) and the government sponsored "[Education City](#)" in Qatar. Overall, the style, structure and tone of *The Great Brain Race* is heavily reminiscent of the other great evangelist for globalisation, [Thomas Freidman](#), author of books on globalisation such as *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* and *The World is Flat*.

Unfortunately, *The Great Brain Race* also shares some of the problems seen in Freidman's books. Wildavsky is extremely dismissive of those whom he calls "academic protectionists" and clearly has little time for those who are sceptical of college rankings, satellite campuses, for-profit universities or online learning. While this is a valid position, he overlooks that academics may be concerned that attempts to centrally measure student learning may compromise curricular independence or that questions have been raised about the conflicts of interest inherent in for-profit institutions, especially those receiving public money.

Wildavsky does attempt to provide a context for the changes that HE is undergoing, pointing out as early as page 3 that "scholarly mobility has a long-standing tradition, dating back some nine hundred years to a time when students from around Europe flocked to the first universities in Bologna, Paris and Oxford". Indeed, at the start of Chapter Four he even discusses the merits of some of the primitive rankings devised in the early part of the twentieth century. He also provides statistics, such as the growth in the numbers of students studying [online courses in the U.S](#) from 2004 to 2009, at various points.

However, most of the quantitative data is focused on changes in the last fifteen years, and is presented in absolute terms. Given the mass expansion of higher education in recent years, such figures can give a misleading impression about the extent (though not the overall direction) of globalisation. There are some startling omissions. For instance, there is no discussion of the role that University of London external degrees played in Commonwealth higher education. Even more surprisingly, the [Open University](#), one of the most prominent examples of distance learning, only gets one mention in the form of a quote from a visiting Professor at the Open University's Centre for Higher Education Research.

*The Great Brain Race* is topical and makes a compelling argument. However, it would be even stronger if it was more nuanced and involved a greater awareness of historical context.

*This reviews was originally published on the [British Politics and Policy at LSE blog](#) on 27th February 2011.*

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