

Introduction: International Innovation & American Challenges

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We often measure the strength of nations by GDP or by the size of armies, navies, and air forces. But it can also be measured in the realm of ideas. Today, the influence of a nation may be gauged by the strength of its universities and the ability to develop and attract talent. The foremost global powers of the last three centuries have all been leaders of scholarship and learning. In the nineteenth century, the modern research university born in Berlin propelled Germany to the forefront of science and global power. In the twentieth century, the strength and allure of American universities were central to an “American century” of world influence. In 2024, nearly every major ranking of global universities shows American institutions still in leading positions. Yet we know this was not the case in 1924, and there is no reason to assume it will be true in 2124. Today, American leadership in higher education – as in other areas – is under great stress, particularly in its public universities, but also in its distinguished private universities, which have become lightning rods in the political and culture wars of the day.

In the United States, forty-three of all fifty states have disinvested in higher education since 2008. Because public universities educate the majority of American students, these states have disinvested in their own future and the nation’s future. The slow-motion defunding of U.S. public higher education also threatens our famous private universities. After all, Harvard and Stanford compete with Berkeley and Michigan (and many other great public universities) for the same faculty, graduate students, and senior administrators. In education as in any business, competition is a key to excellence. On the West Coast, the University of California, Berkeley, is the flagship of what has been the greatest system of public higher education in the world. California would not be the California we know without its signature network of public universities. Today, Berkeley is a bellwether for the future of American universities, nearly brought to its knees by a series of massive budget cuts, a poster child of the enduring unwillingness of the American public to support public higher education.

On the East Coast, our oldest university, Harvard, faces the challenge of its success and arrogance – what Richard Brodhead, former dean of Yale College and former president of Duke University, has called (in the case of Yale) “the inertia of excellence.”¹ Things have been so good, how can you possibly do better? Institutions in that situation are seldom pioneers. And as recent events at Harvard have shown, America’s oldest and most famous university has great difficulty with self-governance. It is run by an opaque and secretive Corporation, itself managed by a controlling Office of the Governing Boards, which I compare to the Japanese Imperial Household in my recent book, *Empires of Ideas*. Things *can* change but change must come in imperceptible increments.² Right now, the Japanese Imperial Household is looking better.

Across the country, the liberal arts, and especially the humanities, appear on the budgetary chopping block as humanities enrollments fall and engagement in STEM fields flourish. As politics increasingly intrude on a college education, long-standing academic freedoms have come under threat, including those of institutional autonomy. I chair the board of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), where President Joy Connolly has put the challenge this way: “The growing challenges to academic freedom across the country demand that organizations like ACLS avoid party politics but boldly advocate on behalf of dialogue and the free exchange of ideas and against censorship.”³

All this may explain why there is a broad and deep anxiety about the future of American higher education within the United States. This is clear in the sizeable cottage industry of books that has emerged to bewail the limits, failings, or demise of American universities. Derek Bok, former president of Harvard University, has written about *Our Underachieving Colleges* and, most recently, “Why Americans Love to Hate Harvard.”⁴ My learned colleague in Harvard’s English Department, Jim Engell, worried about *Saving Higher Education in the Age of Money*. On a similar theme, Duke University’s Charles Clotfelter has authored *Unequal Colleges in the Age of Disparity*, while Holden Thorp, former chancellor of the University of North Carolina, has written of the need to “rebuild the partnership between America and its colleges.”⁵ James Shulman, then of the Mellon Foundation, collaborated with William G. Bowen, former president of Princeton University, to study *The Game of Life* and how collegiate sports in the United States have warped educational values.⁶

To continue this urgent discussion, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, apart from worrying that the humanities are no longer *The Heart of the Matter*, warned about *The Perils of Complacency* in American science and engineering, and it has linked the future of undergraduate education to the future of America.⁷ Oxford University’s Simon Marginson, invited by Berkeley to give the Clark Kerr Lectures on the Role of Higher Education in Society, concluded that *The Dream is Over*, while others believe that the most important agenda for American education is now *Surpassing Shanghai*. American higher education has become a *Palace*

of *Ashes*, echoes another book, whose subtitle is *China and the Decline of American Higher Education*.⁸ This sampling of works, along with the international accounts provided in this volume of *Dædalus*, help illustrate current tensions around higher education in the United States and abroad.

As Emily J. Levine's first essay in our volume reminds us, American institutions – Johns Hopkins, Chicago, and later Harvard and Berkeley – became serious research innovators in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, by adopting (and improving) German models.⁹ In turn, they transformed America's educational landscape. American universities, public or private, came to lead the world by learning from others. But when was the last time you saw an American university president or dean look abroad for new models for research or teaching? As we will see, several remarkable U.S. institutions have established international campuses, but few American universities look beyond our borders for new ideas. That is a shame. For a central purpose of this volume is to explore a vibrant world of experimentation and innovation, mostly outside the United States, in multiple settings where new colleges and universities are being founded and old ones reimaged. And where newly ambitious national systems (for example, in China and India) are laying the foundations for contending with the United States for leadership in global higher education.

Not all of the case studies here are success stories, for all exist in distinct political ecologies, some of which can prove nourishing, while others destroy ambitious undertakings in the world of universities. Sadly, we are not able to cover every region of the world in one volume, though we wish we had time and space to explore innovation in Latin America and Africa.¹⁰ Perhaps the most direct way to broaden the horizons of American universities is to internationalize their geographic footprints.

That work is described in essays by Mariët Westermann, Marwan M. Kraidy, Pericles Lewis, and Haiyan Gao and Yijun Gu.¹¹ What is clear from these cases on NYU Abu Dhabi, Northwestern University in Qatar, Duke Kunshan University (DKU) in China, and Yale-NUS College in Singapore is that the international offspring of the American parent take on an institutional character of their own, shaped by their international environment. If successful – and these examples have exceeded expectations – we find them not to be “branch campuses,” but vibrant schools connected both to their mother ship and to local institutions. Each develops its own signature curriculum: in the case of DKU, that of “rooted globalism,” a curricular innovation that has proven more successful than the curricular renovation attempted simultaneously at Duke University's home campus in Durham, North Carolina. (I was Duke's senior adviser on China in the establishment of DKU, and I must say it is energizing to create a new curriculum before there are any students or faculty to criticize it.)

It is telling that most of these initiatives, with the signal exception of Yale, come not from the oldest, established universities (such as my own, which is famously risk-averse) but from ambitious, younger institutions seeking in part to make a mark at home by excelling abroad and, in the process, transforming the university in all its settings. It is sad, therefore, that Yale's imaginative partnership with the National University of Singapore should now be coming to an end because of the political and cultural insecurities of that city-state. It is also a bit ironic (though predictable) that a communist Chinese regime would provide higher levels of autonomy for the "special educational zones" of Duke Kunshan University, NYU-Shanghai, and Schwarzman College at Tsinghua University, than a litigious, controlling Singapore proved able to give Yale.

Many of our explorations in this volume are usefully grouped by geography and national strategies. In Asia, no country has seen more revolutionary change in higher education than China. In 1977, Chinese universities were just reopening after the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution. Today, they are poised for positions of international leadership in research and education, building on one hundred thirty years of institutional experience and several millennia of Chinese veneration of education. Thus, they enjoy matchless investment.

This recent and rapid growth of Chinese universities (now with more than forty million students enrolled) has outpaced the great postwar expansion of higher education in the United States and the growth of mass-enrollment universities in Europe in the 1970s and 1980s. Square acreage of universities in China has grown fivefold in the past two decades. Unlike the American expansion of the G.I. Bill era of the 1950s and the European growth of the 1970s, this educational growth has elements that are knowingly elitist, with the ambition to build more of the best "world-class" universities. Toward this goal, China has mobilized both state and private resources, and it has at hand more of the best human capital (Chinese scholars at home or in the global diaspora) than any university system in the world.

Chinese universities continue to rise in global rankings, and two of them now outrank most of the American "Ivy League" – Tsinghua and Peking. These universities are also investing enormously in research. The most innovative experiment creatively with conceptions of liberal education that have both German and American antecedents. Thus, as Mianheng Jiang notes in his case study of Shanghai-Tech, the new science and engineering university that he leads, the liberal arts make up an "indispensable component" of its interdisciplinary, interactive, and small-class-based undergraduate curriculum.¹²

Yet as Wen-hsin Yeh shows in her essay, leading Chinese universities, all of which were founded on international models, remain underappreciated at home and abroad.¹³ They are sites of ongoing tension between internationalized intel-

lectuals and a nationalistic Communist party-state. Her description of UC Berkeley's engagement with Tsinghua and Peking Universities puts all three institutions in comparative perspective. Yet she ultimately notes how the reform and growth of higher education in China have produced "tremendous results." In my own view, if any country is to challenge the United States for leadership in global higher education, it is China.

Universities in Hong Kong have enjoyed greater autonomy than those on the Chinese mainland, and they have made the most of it, with an expansion of undergraduate education from three to four years to allow for innovative general education programs in the liberal arts and sciences. With this came a remarkable expansion of the place of the arts in public spaces and discourse, within and beyond universities. How the arts have been valued and defended in periods of comparative openness, until 2014, and of political contestation ever since is the subject of Mette Hjort's illuminating essay.¹⁴ As the darkening shadow of a new National Security Law hovers over Hong Kong's eight excellent, well-funded, and differentiated universities, a strategy of integrating the arts with scholarly realms like science and technology shows promise. Hong Kong Baptist University, whose vision is to be "a leading liberal arts university in Asia," has emerged as the leader in the field of "Art-Tech." With financial support of that British-era holdover, the University Grants Committee, there is "hope and inspiration" still in the liberal arts in Hong Kong.¹⁵

Hong Kong's universities also have the advantage of being at once Chinese in cultural terms, and largely English (language) in teaching and research. Thus, the University of Hong Kong can aspire to be "Asia's Global University." By contrast, Japan has taken "a long and wrong road to globalization," according to Takehiko Kariya in his contribution to this volume.¹⁶ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Japan was the educational innovator of East Asia, founding universities on German models and, through Japanese translations of major Western works, providing the texts and vocabulary that would define political and scientific ideas in China and elsewhere. Yet Japan's early and elite success in globalization, stimulated anew in the decades after World War II, would not be sustained. Having caught up to the West as an economic dynamo in the 1980s and having expanded greatly the role of private universities at home, Japan became more insular in educational terms, with fewer students studying abroad and a diminishing need for English language in schools at home.

As Kariya notes, what began as a determination "to find our own path" in the 1980s became viewed as a "lag in globalization" and a "critical situation" for Japanese universities by the 2010s.¹⁷ This, perhaps, is another example of that inertia of excellence: the great domestic success of Japanese universities as sites of social mobility and engines of economic growth has limited their engagement and impact internationally. Is this a bad thing? Not necessarily for Japan. Is it a symptom of the disease of the "linguistic imperialism" of English?¹⁸ Almost surely. Still, the

Japanese experience is perhaps a warning to those Chinese universities currying favor with Xi Jinping's regime that wish to withdraw from global rankings to pursue an "education with Chinese characteristics."

What about India, home to the world's largest number of institutions that call themselves colleges or universities, with half of the world's college-age population and forty-one million enrolled students – yet a gross enrollment ratio a little more than half of China's? In their complementary essays, Jamshed Bharucha and Tarun Khanna provide us with a history and overview of a higher-education sector that is both highly decentralized and heavily regulated, with large state and mostly for-profit private sectors, including extraordinary technical institutes and less distinguished comprehensive universities.¹⁹ Like Hong Kong, India has a British-style University Grants Commission (UGC) that funds, funds, and maintains standards in higher-education institutions. Unlike Hong Kong, India's UGC has been criticized for stifling innovation with what Bharucha calls stultifying generations of regulations. Echoing the Chinese aim to develop world-class universities (and perhaps emulating Germany's Excellence Initiative), an Institutes of Eminence program was started in 2017 to propel ten public and ten private institutions upward in global rankings. Khanna was one of the "empowered experts" charged with making those recommendations.

In 2020, India announced a new National Education Policy (NEP) to "provide universal access to quality education."²⁰ (May India's NEP have a longer history than Lenin's "New Economic Policy," so quickly abandoned in the first years of the Soviet Union.) For all that public investment and political attention, Khanna celebrates a vibrant and emergent "entrepreneurial ecosystem" that directs private philanthropy toward higher education, for example in the Indian School of Business, Ashoka University, Plaksha University, and Krea University – the last three of which place extraordinary emphasis on integrating the liberal arts with science, technology, and business.²¹

Bharucha draws on his experience as founding vice chancellor of Sai University in Chennai, India, to take these themes further. Sai is a "state private university" established by a government act but supported by private philanthropy. Admitting its first undergraduates in 2021, Sai is pioneering the integration of programs in law and technology with the arts and sciences. An important aim of Sai – a university without departments – is to give Indian undergraduates (and their parents) an education that goes beyond their country's obsession with engineering, and to provide an Indian alternative to a broad undergraduate education that is more easily found in Britain or the United States.

Of all the experiments in South Asia or anywhere for that matter, none can match the aspiration and audacity of the Asian University for Women (AUW). Set in Bangladesh's hardscrabble harbor city of Chittagong, this independent, regional

university has the education and empowerment of women leaders as its goal. It pursues this mission through a rigorous education in the liberal arts and sciences. In his essay, founder Kamal Ahmad describes its emancipatory mission for “the most neglected and defenseless populations” of Asia.²² For this, he has recruited the world’s notables to the university’s leadership and boards. Chief among them: Cherie Blair, Laura Bush, and Bangladesh’s powerful Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Harvard’s Henry Rosovsky and Jack Meyer provided counsel and support to AUW. Moshe Safdie created the initial designs for an iconic campus, whose redesign and construction are now under the guidance of the Pritzker Prize-winning architect Renzo Piano.

In short, this is a high-profile, high-risk, and high-reward effort to make a regional difference and global impact from a remote setting. Ahmad is candid, however, about AUW’s challenges in funding, the recruitment and retention of faculty, and the logistics of building infrastructure in a setting threatened by global warming. Having visited AUW in its early years, I can attest that if its outrageous ambition (to borrow a phrase from Duke University) bears enduring fruit, then anything is possible in our world of universities.²³

Europe is the ancestral home of the medieval and modern university. It is also a current site of reform, renewal, and political reaction to change. From East Berlin to Ulaanbaatar, the Soviet (or socialist) model of higher education held sway across much of Eurasia for four decades – and more after the end of World War II. Isak Frumin and Daria Platonova reconstruct for us the ideals and structures that underpinned a system that was at once populist (with free and equal accessibility) and elitist (with comparatively small institutions designed for specialized training to serve the state and the planned economy).²⁴ In their analysis, they show that certain elements of the socialist model would have a long afterlife: the idea of universities as drivers of economic growth, that universities should be places of fair access, and that universities should engage in “formative education” of individuals in a larger collective.

It was in rejection of the Soviet model that the Central European University (CEU) in Budapest was founded in 1991, the year the Soviet Union collapsed, by the Hungarian American financier and philanthropist George Soros. Michael Ignatieff, rector emeritus of CEU, places the story of that university and its unceremonious ousting from Hungary, by authoritarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, within a larger geopolitical landscape.²⁵ It is a story that goes far beyond Hungary to the global question of how debates on academic freedom have widened the divide between liberal and authoritarian regimes, and also become part of the arsenal of right-wing critiques of Western universities.²⁶ Yet the Hungarian story is riveting in itself, as Ágota Révész recounts in her assessment of how Orbán’s ousting of CEU was accompanied by an effort to find a more compliant political

replacement.²⁷ The substitute came in the form of a Budapest campus for Shanghai's Fudan University – a contentious project apparently put on ice thanks to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and, it now seems, by a marked lack of enthusiasm from Fudan.

It is, rather, in the ancient academic bastions of Britain and the Netherlands that Europe today finds several of its premier initiatives in the liberal arts and sciences. Carl Gombrich and Amelia Peterson detail the 2021 launch of The London Interdisciplinary School (LIS), which, like several of our Indian examples, is a publicly regulated private institution that was started by philanthropic entrepreneurs.²⁸ Gombrich, who created Britain's first bachelor's degree program in arts and sciences at University College London in 2010, was recruited to be LIS's founding faculty director. With a curriculum focused on problems and methods, not individual disciplines, and with faculty members as “coaches” and subjects of study as “superconcepts,” LIS aims to make its mark on undergraduate and professional learners in a city that is not short of more traditional institutions.

Across the North Sea, in Amsterdam and now also in Germany, one of the most impactful set of institutions discussed in this volume arose, in universities that had long neglected their roots in the arts and sciences. These institutions, called the new “university colleges,” ascended within the walls of large research universities as “an innovation [that] was in fact a small renaissance of liberal arts and science education.”²⁹ Promoted as an educational reform that would bring the idea of the American liberal arts college back to Europe, these University Colleges grew as residential honors colleges with small-group instruction, yet with the resources of large universities at their disposal. Marijk C. van der Wende tells how she and other associates built Amsterdam University College to offer (and I can confirm this, having served on its advisory board) a rigorous, international, interdisciplinary, and *affordable* college of arts and sciences – in which the sciences are equal partners.³⁰ Too bad one must go abroad to see how this “American” model might work at home.

Today, educational innovation is not bound by geography. Our final set of essays describes initiatives and institutions that either are or should be borderless. In her contribution, “Global Education without Walls: A Multidisciplinary Investigation of University Learning in Online Environments across Disciplines,” Olga Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia shares the research of the PLATO project, which involves more than twenty universities in Europe, North America, and Asia, studies the skills needed by students to intelligently navigate the internet, and discusses how institutions need to reimagine curriculum and instruction in the age of ChatGPT.³¹

Fernando M. Reimers explores global approaches to climate change and sustainability in his essay.³² During an age in which the mission of research universities is not simply to advance knowledge (as if this were simple), but to “solve”

the largest problems facing humanity, what are the responsibilities, roles, and ideal strategies of institutions of higher education? In teaching about climate change, who should be taught, what should they be taught, and how should they be taught? To answer these questions, Reimers explores the alternatives of a mandatory course in Italy; the “organic incorporation” of climate change into classes at the University of Tasmania in Australia; and the intentional embedding of climate studies across the curriculum, with examples from Mexico and Brazil.³³ How one measures success in this endeavor will be a long-term project: I recall being taught in college about the coming disaster of climate change fifty years ago.

Richard C. Levin is not only the president emeritus of Yale and cofounder of Yale-NUS College, he also served as CEO of Coursera, the groundbreaking online educational platform that offers some four thousand courses to more than one hundred million registered learners. Like so many “next big things” in higher education (see ChatGPT), the massive open online courses pioneered by Coursera did *not* change everything. But they did change and are changing a lot. (How else could I have half a million learners in my China course on edX? Without that experience, how could I also be confident in teaching all my students online during COVID-19?) Levin offers a learned and experienced analysis of the present and future impact of online education on higher education globally to show that high-quality education *can* be low cost.³⁴

Conceived as a Silicon Valley startup, Minerva University is another child of the internet age. As noted by Teri A. Cannon and Stephen M. Kosslyn in their essay, it is “the intentional university.”³⁵ (How many, I wonder, were founded by chance?) All classes are taught online synchronously, even though all students live in residence. Like so many of the institutions studied in this volume, Minerva’s mission is to redefine a liberal arts education for the twenty-first century. It does so through an emphasis on “practical knowledge,” active learning, and exposure to the wider world. Cannon and Kosslyn show that Minerva, too, aims to educate people from different social backgrounds to solve problems, not just study disciplines; to develop a global perspective; and to do all this while keeping costs low. Its students will acquire the skills to be “leaders, creators, problem-solvers, and innovators in the twenty-first century” and it is off to a terrific start since its conception in 2012.³⁶ Over one decade later, it now has a graduation rate of 90 percent. Whereas only 15 percent of its graduates immediately go on to graduate study (the number at Amsterdam University College is more like 85 percent), an equal number start companies. This is an education in the liberal arts and sciences for the Silicon Valley ecosystem – and those who would emulate it.

How, at the end of the day, do we evaluate the rich menu of opportunities and warnings that are to be found in the contributions to this volume? One answer, according to Gökhan Depo’s eviscerating essay on the role of rankings, is *not* to rely on notorious league tables: the Times Higher Education World University

Rankings (THE), the QS World University Rankings (QS), or the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) – let alone those from *U.S. News & World Report*, a failing magazine that was reincarnated as a rankings machine.³⁷ Yet rankings do show, however imperfectly, the shifting tectonic plates of global leadership in higher education. Had rankings such as those read today by deans and presidents around the world existed a century ago, German universities would still have pride of place. Harvard University, which ranks very well at present, would not have been in the top ten, perhaps not even the top twenty. Today, at least according to QS's portfolio, Peking University and Tsinghua University outperform every German university. Times change.

Ranking those who would reimagine or renew education, in a volume concentrated on the liberal arts and sciences, is an exercise for the future. Still, what is remarkable to me in reviewing these case studies is how strong the commitment remains to an education rooted in the arts and sciences. This devotion – set out by Wilhelm von Humboldt in the University of Berlin, the first modern research university – has endured over the past two centuries. Throughout this period, it became a foundation of American undergraduate education and now enjoys a moment of flourishing exploration (and, in places, resistance) around the world.

To return to the issues raised at the outset of this introduction: what does any of this mean for the United States and for readers of a volume published by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences? In my view, American leadership in global higher education, so clear a generation ago, exists at present *faute de mieux*, for lack of a clear competitor. But there will be alternatives. Look at China. Look at India. Look at Bangladesh! Look at Amsterdam and London. Look at the joint-venture universities in East Asia and the Middle East, which are as much the products of their geographic hosts as of their home campuses.

Leadership in global higher education (as in any realm) is a comparative judgment. Retaining leadership is America's challenge. The United States is finally reinvesting in its physical infrastructure but it now needs to reinvest in its intellectual infrastructure, particularly in its public universities, which are the academic equivalent of unrepaired roads, rusty rails, and failing bridges. These institutions educate nearly 80 percent of American students, and they have the dual and difficult responsibility of being both the major portal for first-generation American students and welcoming international talent to our shores. If the essays in this volume are any indication, American colleges and universities need to reconceive how an imaginative education in the liberal arts and sciences can be extended to new generations of students. I urge my colleagues in higher education to study what is happening elsewhere in the world.

EDITORS' NOTE

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This issue of *Dædalus* provided the guest editors the opportunity to synthesize their knowledge of the history of higher education in many places with their expertise on the current educational scene in the United States. All of us working on these issues today owe an enormous debt to Philip Altbach, founder and long-term director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College. Directly or not, we are all his students.

We hope this issue will give rise to more discussion about innovation in higher education around the world. In this spirit, we have established a forthcoming website, TheWorldOfHigherEducation.squarespace.com, so that other individuals may contribute information about other programs, institutions, and lines of work and inquiry. We hope that readers will consider submitting comments or essays so that we may build on the ideas presented in these pages.

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ENDNOTES

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- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 129–130.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.
- ¹⁹ Jamshed Bharucha, “India’s Realignment of Higher Education,” *Dædalus* 153 (2) (Spring 2024): 136–148, <https://www.amacad.org/publication/indias-realignment-higher-education>; and Tarun Khanna, “One Aspirational Future for India’s Higher Education Sector,” *Dædalus* 153 (2) (Spring 2024): 149–166, <https://www.amacad.org/publication/one-aspirational-future-indias-higher-education-sector>.
- ²⁰ Khanna, “One Aspirational Future for India’s Higher Education Sector,” 151.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 149.
- ²² Kamal Ahmad, “Up Close: Asian University for Women,” *Dædalus* 153 (2) (Spring 2024): 167, <https://www.amacad.org/publication/close-asian-university-women>.
- ²³ Terry Sanford used this phrase in his last address as president of Duke University, during the Annual Meeting of the Faculty. Terry Sanford, “Outrageous Ambitions,” Duke University, October 25, 1984.
- ²⁴ Isak Frumin and Daria Platonova, “The Socialist Model of Higher Education: The Dream Faces Reality,” *Dædalus* 153 (2) (Spring 2024): 178–193, <https://www.amacad.org/publication/socialist-model-higher-education-dream-faces-reality>.
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